

E.WERNER

UNDER A

CHARM. VOL. III

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Under a Charm. Vol. III

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Содержание

PART THE SECOND	5
CHAPTER XI	6
CHAPTER XII	13
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	19

E. Werner
Under a Charm: A Novel. Vol. III

PART THE SECOND

(Continued.)

CHAPTER XI

The border-station lay, as has already been mentioned, only half a league distant from the frontier, in the midst of some of the thickest plantations on the Wilicza land. The building, which was large and even handsome, had been erected by the late Herr Nordeck at no inconsiderable cost; but there was a desolate, decayed look about the place, nothing whatever having been done towards its preservation or repair, either by master or tenant, for the last twenty years. The present forester owed his position solely to the Princess Baratowska's favour, that lady having taken advantage of the vacancy caused by his predecessor's death to advance one of her own supporters to the post. Osiecki had now filled it for three years. His frequent encroachments and somewhat negligent performance of his duties were altogether overlooked by his mistress, because she knew that the forester was devoted to her personally, and that she could count on him in any circumstances. Hitherto, Osiecki had but rarely been brought in contact with his master, and, on the whole, had followed with fair exactness the instructions received from him. Waldemar himself came but very rarely to the lonely, outlying station. It was only during the last few weeks that the perpetual conflicts between the foresters and the military stationed on the frontier had obliged him to interfere.

It was still to all appearances midwinter. The house and forest stood laden with snow in the dim light which fell from a heavy overcast sky. The ranger had assembled all his troop—five or six foresters under his orders, and some woodmen. They were all standing with their guns thrown over their shoulders, evidently waiting for the master's coming; but it certainly did not look as though they were ready to obey and peaceably to quit the station, as Waldemar had commanded. The dark defiant faces of the men augured nothing good, and the ranger's appearance fully justified the assertion that he was 'capable of anything.' These people, who lived from year's end to year's end in the solitude of the woods, were not very punctilious in their notions of duty, cared little for either law or order; and Osiecki especially was notorious for the liberty of action he allowed himself, following generally the promptings of his own arbitrary will.

Nevertheless, they as yet preserved a respectful attitude, for before them stood the young Countess Morynska. She had thrown back her mantle. Her beautiful face betrayed nothing of the struggle and torture she had gone through but an hour or two ago; it was only very grave now, and coldly severe.

"You have brought us to an evil pass, Osiecki," she said. "You should have been careful not to attract suspicion or attention to the station, instead of which you quarrel with the patrols, and imperil everything by your indiscreet conduct. The Princess is extremely displeased with you. I come in her name once more emphatically to forbid any acts of violence whatever, no matter against whom. This time you must make up your mind to obey. Your ill-judged proceedings have done harm enough."

The reproach made an evident impression on the forester. He looked down, and there was something almost apologetic in his voice as he answered with mingled defiance and contrition—

"Well, it is done now. I could not hold back my men this time—nor myself either, for that matter. If the Princess, or you, my lady, knew what it is for us to lie here quiet day by day, while the fighting is going on out yonder, to look on at the doings of those soldier fellows and not to be allowed to stir a finger, though we have our loaded rifles in our hands! It would wear out any man's patience, and ours broke down the day before yesterday. If I did not know that we are wanted here, we should all have been over yonder with our own people long ago. Prince Baratowski is only a couple of hours from the frontier; it would not be hard to find the way to him."

"You will stop here!" replied Wanda, with decision. "You know my father's orders. The station is to be held, come what may, and for that reason you are more necessary to us here than out yonder at the seat of war. Prince Baratowski has men enough at his disposal. But now to the main point. Herr Nordeck is coming here to-day."

"Yes, yes," said the ranger, with a sneer. "He means to make us obey, he says. We are to go over to Wilicza, where he will have us constantly under his eye, where we cannot lift a hand without having him behind us, looking over our shoulders. Yes, he is a good one to command, is Nordeck; but the question is whether just at this time he will find any one to obey him. He had better bring a whole regiment of soldiers with him, if he wants to drive us out of the station—else it is not certain but the thing may take a bad turn."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the young Countess, slowly. "Are you forgetting that Waldemar Nordeck is your mistress's son?"

"Prince Baratowski is her son and our master," the forester broke forth; "and it is a shame that she and all of us should have to obey this German, just because his father forced his way in among us twenty years ago, and got possession of the Morynski estates and of a Countess Morynska for his wife. It was bad enough that she should have to put up with that man for years; but now the son gives her still more bitter bread to eat—we know well enough what terms they are on. If she were to lose him, she would not grieve much more than she did for his father, and it would be the best thing that could happen to the whole family. Then the orders from the Castle need not be given in secret; the Princess would reign, and our young Prince would be the heir and the master of Wilicza, as he should be of right."

Wanda turned pale. The unhappy position in which mother and son stood to each other had already so made its baneful influence felt that their subordinates could calculate in cold blood what advantages Waldemar's death would bring to his nearest relatives, that they reckoned on the Princess's forgiveness, to whatever extremity they might resort. There was here something more to check and subdue than an outbreak of momentary fury and irritation. Wanda saw her worst fears confirmed; but she knew that by no word, no look must she betray her inward anxiety. She was held in respect only as Count Morynski's daughter, as the Princess's niece, and no doubt was felt that she spoke in the name of the latter. If once the motive were guessed which had really brought her hither, there would be an end to her authority, and she would lose all chance of protecting Waldemar.

"Do not venture to lay hands on your master," she said, imperiously, but as calmly as though she were actually fulfilling her mission. "Happen what may, the Princess desires that her son may be spared, his safety ensured at any cost. Let the man who dares to attack him look to himself! You will obey, Osiecki—obey unconditionally. Once already you have angered her with your disobedience. Do not attempt it a second time."

The forester struck his gun impatiently on the floor, and there was an uneasy movement among the bystanders who had hitherto listened to the conversation in silence; yet no one ventured to offer opposition—no one even murmured. The command had been sent to them by the Princess, who was the one authority they recognised. Wanda would have gained her end, if more time had been granted her in which to work on the men's minds; but, hasten hither as she might, she had only been able to obtain an advance of a few minutes on Waldemar. At this moment his sledge drove up outside. All eyes were turned to the window. The young Countess started.

"Already? Open the side door quickly for me, Osiecki. Say no syllable to betray my presence here. I will go as soon as Herr Nordeck has left."

The forester obeyed with all haste. He knew that Countess Morynska must on no account be seen here by the master—else all their secrets would be betrayed. Wanda stepped quickly into a small and dimly lighted chamber, and the door was at once closed upon her.

It was high time. Two minutes later Waldemar appeared in the room she had just left. He stopped on the threshold and took a steady look at the circle of foresters who had grouped themselves around the ranger, their rifles in their hands. The sight was not an encouraging one for the young master, who came thus alone among them with the view of reducing the rebels to submission; but his face was quite unmoved, and his voice rang out firm and clear as he said, turning to the ranger—

"I did not announce my coming to you, Osiecki; but you seem to be prepared for it."

"Yes, Herr Nordeck, we were expecting you," was the laconic reply.

"Armed? in such an attitude? What are you doing with your rifles? Lay them down."

Countess Morynska's warning must have had some effect, for they obeyed. The ranger was the first to put down his weapon; but he placed it well within reach of his hand, and the others followed his example. Waldemar now advanced into the middle of the room.

"I have come to ask for an explanation of a mistake which occurred yesterday, Osiecki," he said. "My orders could not be misunderstood, I sent them in writing; but the messenger who brought your reply cannot have understood his errand. What did you really commission him to say to me?"

This was going straight to the root of the matter. The short, precise question was not to be evaded; it demanded an answer equally precise. Yet the forester hesitated. He had not the courage to repeat to his master's face that which he had yesterday charged his messenger to declare.

"I am the border-ranger," said he, at last, "and I mean to remain so while I am in your service, Herr Nordeck. I am responsible for my station, therefore I must have the management of it, and no one else."

"But you have shown that you are not capable of managing it," replied Waldemar, gravely. "You either cannot, or will not, hold your men in check. I warned you repeatedly on two former occasions when excesses had been committed. That affair of the day before yesterday was the third, and it will be the last."

"I can't keep my men quiet when they fall in with the patrols at such a time as this," declared the ranger, with a flash of defiance. "I have no authority over them now."

"For that very reason you must be removed to Wilicza—there I shall be able to furnish the necessary authority, if yours falls short."

"And my station?"

"Will remain for the present under the supervision of Inspector Fellner, until the arrival of the new ranger whom I had destined for Wilicza. He must make up his mind to take your post for a while. You yourself will stay at the Castle-station until there is peace again in the land out yonder."

Osiecki laughed ironically. "It may be a long time first."

"Perhaps not so long as you think. At any rate, you will have to leave this house to-morrow."

A somewhat significant movement was noticeable among the men as he repeated his order in most decided tones, and the forester's passion blazed up fiercely.

"Herr Nordeck!" he exclaimed.

"Well?"

"I declared yesterday ..."

"I hope you have taken counsel since then, and that to-day you are ready to declare it was through a misunderstanding your messenger brought me such an incredible answer. Take care what you are about, Osiecki. I should think you must know me sufficiently by this time."

"Yes, indeed, you have taken good care that all Wilicza should know you," muttered the ranger between his set teeth.

"Then you know, too, that I brook no disobedience, and that I never take back an order once given. The forester's house at Wilicza is empty at present. You will either move into it before noon tomorrow with all your staff, or you may consider yourself dismissed from my service."

A threatening murmur rose among the men. They crowded more closely together, their looks and attitude showing plainly that it was only by an effort they still restrained themselves from any overt act of violence. Osiecki stepped up to his employer, and stood close before him.

"Oh, oh, the thing is not so easily settled," he cried. "I am no common day labourer to be hired to-day and discharged to-morrow. You can give me warning if you like; but I have a right to stay here till the autumn, and so have the men I have engaged. My district lies among the border-forests. I want no other, and I'll take no other, and the man who tries to oust me will fare but badly."

"You mistake," replied Waldemar. "The station is my property, and the ranger is bound to conform to my instructions. Do not insist on a right which you have forfeited through your own misconduct. The act committed by your men under your leadership the other day deserves a far severer punishment than a mere removal to another post. You have insulted the patrols; you have now gone so far as to attack them—there were even shots fired. If you were not arrested on the spot, you may thank the consideration in which I am held in L— for it. It is well known there that I have the will and, if need be, the power to keep the peace on my estates, and that I do not care to have strangers coming between me and those whom I employ; but some serious interference on my part is now expected of me, and I shall respond to that expectation without delay. You will at once comply with the arrangement I have determined on, or before the day is over I shall offer the station to the officer in command to serve as a post of observation on the frontier, and to-morrow the house will be garrisoned."

Osiecki hastily stretched out his hand towards his rifle; but bethought himself and stopped.

"You will not do that, Herr Nordeck," said he, in a low meaning voice.

"I shall do it, if there is any question of insubordination or resistance. Decide—you have the choice. Shall you be at Wilicza to-morrow or not?"

"No, a thousand times no," shouted Osiecki, roused now to violent excitement. "I have orders not to stir from the station, and I shall yield to nothing but actual force."

Waldemar started. "Orders? From whom?"

The forester bit his lips; but the unguarded word had escaped him, it could not be recalled.

"From whom have you received orders which are in direct opposition to mine?" repeated his employer. "From the Princess Baratowska, perhaps?"

"Well, suppose it were?" asked Osiecki, defiantly. "The Princess has commanded us for years, why should she leave off all at once?"

"Because the master is on the spot himself now, and it is not good that two should rule at one and the same time," said Waldemar, coldly. "My mother lives at the Castle as my guest; but on all matters concerning Wilicza and its management I alone decide. So you have instructions to retain possession of the station at any price, even to resort to force in order to hold it! There appears to be something more here than a mere reckless act of aggression on the part of your men."

The ranger maintained a moody silence. His own imprudence had betrayed him into what the Princess, in speaking to her niece, had stigmatised as 'treason'—had wrought the very evil which Wanda had striven to avert by hurrying to the spot herself. That one hasty word had disclosed to Waldemar that the resistance, to which he had hitherto attached no special importance, was one planned and executed under orders; and he knew his mother too well not to feel sure that, if she had given orders for the station to be held at all hazards—even for the use of force in its defence in case of need—this must be the point where the many threads conjoined which, spite of recent difficulties, she had never let slip from her experienced hands.

"No matter," he began again. "We will not discuss the past. To-morrow the border-station will be in other hands. We can settle all that remains to be settled between us at Wilicza. Till to-morrow, then."

He moved as though to go; but Osiecki barred his way. The forester had snatched up his rifle, and now held it in an apparently negligent fashion which was yet significant enough.

"I think we had better settle our accounts on the spot, Herr Nordeck. Once for all, I shall not leave my station to move to Wilicza or anywhere else, and you yourself don't stir from this room until you have recalled your words—not one step."

He would have signed to his confederates, but no sign was needed. As at a word of command, each man had grasped his rifle, and in an instant the young master was surrounded. Dark, threatening faces glowered at him on all sides, faces which said plainly that the men who owned them would recoil before no act of violence, and the whole man[oe]uvre was so neatly, so promptly executed, it must

necessarily have been concerted beforehand. Perhaps at this moment Waldemar may have regretted coming alone; but he preserved all his coolness and presence of mind.

"What does this mean?" he asked. "Am I to take this for a menace?"

"Take it for what you will," cried the forester, fiercely; "but you will not stir from this spot without first revoking your orders. It is for us now to say 'Take your choice.' Beware what you do. You are not bullet proof."

"Perhaps you have already put that to the test?" Waldemar turned a searching look on the speaker. "Who despatched that ball after me the last time I rode home from this place?"

A glance of deadly hatred darting from Osiecki's eyes was his only answer.

"I have another ball here in the barrel, and each of my men is provided in like manner"—he grasped the weapon more firmly. "If you care to make the experiment, you will find us ready. Now, short and sweet. Give us your word that we shall remain at the station unmolested, that no soldier shall set foot in it—your word of honour, which is generally thought by such as you to be more binding than any written promise, or ..."

"Or?"

"You do not leave this place alive," concluded the forester, trembling with fury and excitement.

Promptly, almost tumultuously, the others ratified the threat. They crowded nearer. Six barrels, ominously raised, lent weight to Osiecki's words—but in vain. Not a muscle of Waldemar's face moved as he turned slowly, and looked round the circle. He stood in the midst of the rebellious band, cool and collected, as though he were holding the most peaceful conference with his subordinates. He only knitted his brow more closely, and folded his arms with imperturbable and superior calm.

"You are fools!" he returned, in a half-contemptuous voice. "You altogether forget what consequences you would draw down on yourselves. You are lost if you lay hands on me. Discovery would be inevitable."

"Supposing we waited for it," sneered the forester. "What do you think we are so near the frontier for? In half an hour we should be over it and out yonder in the thick of the fight, where no one would ask what game we might have brought down here with our rifles. Any way, we are sick of lying here on the quiet, without ever striking a blow for the cause; so, for the last time, will you give us your word of honour?"

"No," said the young man, neither moving nor averting his eyes from the speaker.

"Reflect, Herr Nordeck." Osiecki's voice was almost choked with rage. "Reflect, while there is yet time."

With two rapid strides Waldemar gained the wall, where, at least, he would be covered in the rear.

"No, I say; and since we have gone so far"—he drew a revolver from his breast-pocket, and pointed it at his assailants—"reflect yourselves before you show fight. A couple of you will pay for the murderous attack with their lives. My aim is as sure as yours."

At this the long pent-up storm broke loose. A wild tumult arose; execrations, curses, threats burst from the infuriated men. More than one among them laid his finger on the trigger, and Osiecki had raised his hand to give the signal for a general assault when the side door was hastily pushed open, and next instant Wanda stood by the side of him they already looked on as their prey.

Her unexpected appearance warded off the worst—for a short space, at least. The foresters paused on seeing Countess Morynska by their master's side, so near to him that any attack on their enemy must endanger her also. Waldemar, for his part, stood for one moment utterly perplexed and amazed. Her sudden advent was inexplicable to him; then, in an instant, the truth flashed through his mind. Wanda's death-like pallor, the expression of desperate energy with which she took her place at his side, told him that she had been aware of his danger, and that she was there for his sake.

The peril was too imminent to leave them time for any explanation, for the exchange of a single word. Wanda had at once turned to the aggressors and was addressing them imperiously,

passionately. Waldemar, who knew but little Polish, who was but just beginning to familiarise himself with the language, understood only that she was issuing orders, resorting to dire threats against his adversaries—all to no avail. She had reached the limits of her power. Their answers came back fierce and menacing, and the ranger stamped with his foot on the ground—he evidently refused obedience. The short and hasty parley lasted but a minute or two. Not an inch of ground had been given up, not a man had lowered his weapon. The rebels, exasperated to blindest fury, were past paying deference, or recognising authority.

"Back, Wanda," said Waldemar, in a low voice, as he tried to put her gently from him. "There will be a fight, you cannot prevent it. Give me room to defend myself."

Wanda did not comply. On the contrary, she stood her ground more steadfastly than ever. She knew that he must succumb to the force of numbers, that his one chance of safety lay in her close neighbourhood. As yet they had not ventured to touch her—as yet no one had dared to drag her from his side; but the moment was drawing nigh when any such lingering scruples would give way.

"Move aside, Countess Morynska," the forester's voice, harsh and full of evil presage, resounded through the tumult. "Aside, or I shall shoot you too."

He raised his rifle. Wanda saw him lay his finger on the trigger, saw the man's features distorted with rage and hatred; and, seeing this, all hesitation, all reflection vanished from her mind. One single clear thought remained, definite, all-absorbing, that of Waldemar's deadly peril; and, grasping at the last resource left her, she threw herself on his breast, shielding him with her own body.

It was too late. The report crashed through the room, and next instant Waldemar's piece responded. With a low cry the forester fell to the ground, where he lay motionless. Waldemar had aimed with terrible precision. He himself stood upright and unhurt, and Wanda with him. The rapid movement, by which she had sought to shield him, had caused him to swerve aside from the sure direction of the deadly weapon, and had saved both him and herself.

It had all happened with such lightning-like speed that none of the others had had time to take part in the fray. In one and the same moment they saw Countess Morynska throw herself between the combatants, saw the forester stretched on the ground, and the master facing them with uplifted revolver, ready to fire his second shot. There was a pause of death-like stillness. For one second no one stirred.

The smoke had not cleared from his barrel before Waldemar had forced Wanda into his own partially sheltered position, and placed himself before her. With one glance he took in the whole situation. He was surrounded; the way out was barred. Six loaded rifles were opposed to his single weapon. If it came to a struggle he felt he was lost and Wanda with him, should she again attempt to come between him and the danger. An effectual defence was not to be thought of. Here boldness alone could save. The boldness might prove mad, rash audacity; but no matter, it must be tried.

He drew himself up erect, threw back with an energetic gesture the hair which had fallen over his forehead, and, pushing up the two barrels nearest him with his hand, stepped out into the midst of his assailants. His stately figure towered high above them all, and his eyes blazed down on his rebellious subjects, as though by their fire alone he could annihilate them.

"Down with your arms!" he thundered, with all the might of his powerful voice. "I will have no rebellion on my land. There lies the first man who has attempted it. He who dares to imitate him will share his fate. Down with your rifles, I say!"

The men stood as though paralysed with astonishment, and stared at their master speechless. They hated him; they were in open revolt against him, and he had just shot down their leader. The first, the most natural impulse would have been to take revenge, now that vengeance was in their hands. No doubt their intention had been to rush upon and close with Waldemar; but when he stepped out among them, thrusting aside their weapons with his hand, as though he did in truth wear a charmed life—when he demanded submission with the look and tone of an absolute and despotic ruler, the old habit of subjection made itself felt, the old spirit of blind obedience which, without question or

demur, bows to the voice of command. With the instinctive docility of lower natures they yielded to the force of a superior mind. They recoiled timidly before those flashing eyes which they had long learned to fear, before that threatening brow with its strange swollen blue vein. And Waldemar stood before them unscathed! Osiecki's ball, which had never before been known to miss its aim, had glanced harmlessly by him, while the forester lay dead on the ground, shot to the heart!

There was something of superstitious awe in the movement with which those nearest him shrank back from their enemy. Gradually the menacing barrels were lowered; the circle round the master grew wider and wider; the venture with which he, one man alone, had braved a sixfold danger, had succeeded.

Waldemar turned and, grasping Wanda's arm, drew her to him. "Now clear a path," he ordered, in the same imperious tone; "make way!"

Some of the men kept their places; but the two foremost fell back hesitatingly and, by so doing, left free the space between them and the door. None of the others offered opposition—in silence they let their employer and Countess Morynska pass. Waldemar did not hasten his steps in the least. He knew that he had only quelled the danger for a moment, that it would return with redoubled force so soon as the insurgents had time to reflect, to recover a consciousness of their superior strength; but he also felt that the least sign of fear would be fatal. The power of his eye and of his voice still held that riotous, unruly band in check; all now depended on their getting clear of their foes before the spell ceased to work, which might happen any moment.

He stepped out with Wanda into the open air. The sledge was waiting outside, and the driver hurried up to them with a face blanched by fear. The sound of shots had attracted him to the window, where he had witnessed part of the scene which had just taken place. Waldemar quickly lifted his companion into the sledge, and got in himself.

"Drive off," he said, briefly and hastily. "At a foot-pace as far as the trees yonder, then give the horses the rein, and into the forest for your life."

The coachman obeyed. He was probably not without apprehensions on his own account. In a few minutes they had reached the friendly trees, and now they dashed onward in mad haste. Waldemar still held his revolver ready cocked in his right hand; but with his left he clasped Wanda's slender fingers tightly, as though he would never again relax his hold. Not until they had placed such a distance between the forester's station and themselves that all fear of murderous bullets despatched in their rear was over, did he relinquish his attitude of defence and turn to his companion. Now for the first time he saw that the hand he held in his was covered with blood. Some heavy drops were trickling down from the sleeve of her dress, and the man who had faced the late danger with a brow of adamant, grew white to the very lips.

"It is nothing," said Wanda, hastily forestalling his question. "Osiecki's ball must have grazed my arm. I did not feel the wound until now."

Waldemar tore out his handkerchief and helped her to bind up the injured arm with it. He was about to speak; but the young Countess raised her white face to him. She neither bade nor forbade him; but in her countenance there was such an expression of mute anguish and entreaty that Waldemar was silenced. He felt he must spare her, for the present, at least. He only spoke her name; but that one word said more than the most impassioned burst of eloquence. "Wanda!"

His look sought hers; but in vain. She did not raise her eyes again, and her hand lay inert and icy cold in his.

"Hope nothing!" she said, in so low a tone that her words hardly reached his ear. "You are the enemy of my people, and I am Leo Baratowski's affianced wife!"

CHAPTER XII

The event at the border-station, resulting in so serious an incident as the ranger's death, could not long remain unknown at Wilicza, where, as may be supposed, it caused great excitement. Nothing could have been more unwelcome to the Princess than this open and bloody conflict. Doctor Fabian and the steward were seized with consternation, and the subordinates, according as they sided with the master or with the Princess, ranged themselves in two opposite camps, and ardently took part for and against the parties concerned. One person alone was, in spite of its tragic termination, made happy by the startling occurrence. Assessor Hubert, as has already been mentioned, chanced to be staying at the steward's house at the time. He at once rose to the height of the situation. The necessary enquiry which followed brought him to the foreground, took him to the Castle in his official capacity, compelled Herr Nordeck to enter into personal communication with him—all things for which Hubert had long sighed, but for which he had hitherto sighed in vain.

Waldemar had informed him with all brevity that, driven by the necessity of self-defence, he had shot down the forester Osiecki, the latter having made a murderous assault upon his person. He had at the same time begged the official to take suitable measures for a clear notification of these circumstances to the authorities at L—, declaring himself ready to undergo any examination, and the representative of the L— police grew great in the sphere thus opened to his activity. He rushed with overwhelming zeal into the inquiry, the conduct of which devolved on him, and made the most wonderful preparations for its prosecution. Unfortunately, the result of all his efforts was small. He was naturally desirous, in the first place, to interrogate all the foresters employed on the station. As witnesses of the occurrence their evidence was of the greatest value; but next day the house was found empty and deserted. The men had preferred to evade any judicial intricacies by putting into execution a long cherished design and escaping in the night across the frontier. Their thorough knowledge of the country made it easy for them to effect their purpose, in spite of the sharp watch kept up on either side. They had doubtless joined the insurgent troops, with whose position they were well acquainted, and were thus beyond the reach of the law which, as personified in Assessor Hubert, stretched forth its arm so longingly after them. Hubert was inconsolable.

"They have gone!" said he to the steward, in a lamentable voice. "They have every one of them taken to their heels. There is not a single man of them left."

"I could have told you that beforehand," said Frank. "Under the circumstances, it was the best thing the fellows could do. Out yonder they are safe from an enquiry which might possibly have shown them up in their true light as accomplices."

"But I wanted to examine them," cried the Assessor, indignantly; "I wanted to take them all into custody."

"It was just on that account they preferred to make themselves scarce; and to be candid, I am glad it has happened so. It was always a danger to us to have that wild lot out on the frontier; now we are free from them without more disturbance. They will hardly come back again, so let them run. Herr Nordeck does not want much fuss made about the business."

"Herr Nordeck's wishes cannot be consulted in this case," declared Hubert, in his most solemn official tones. "He must incline before the majesty of the law, which demands the strictest enquiry, irrespective of persons. There can, of course, be no doubt as to his conduct on the occasion. He acted in self-defence, and only returned the ranger's fire. His declaration to this effect is corroborated by the coachman's evidence, by the foresters' flight, and by the general aspect of the case. He will merely be subjected to an examination or two, and then be absolved from all blame. But there are very different matters in question here. We have to do with an insurrection, with an undoubted conspiracy ..."

The steward sprang to his feet. "For Heaven's sake, don't begin with that again!"

"With a conspiracy," repeated Hubert, paying no heed to the interruption. "Yes, Herr Frank, it was such—all the circumstances of the case tend to prove it."

"Nonsense!" cried the steward, shortly. "It was a revolt against their employer, a personal affair, and nothing else. Deeds of violence were the order of the day with Osiecki and his men, and the Princess closed her eyes to all their misdoings, because she and her orders were held in absolute respect. That rough set owned no authority but hers; and when Herr Nordeck tried to enlighten them and show them he was master, they took to their rifles. Any other man in his place would have been lost, but his energy and presence of mind saved him. He shot down that rascal Osiecki without more ado, and his promptness had such an effect on the others that not one of them dared move a finger. The whole thing is as simple and clear as it can possibly be, and what there is in it to put you on the conspiracy track again, I can't conceive."

"And how do you account for Countess Morynska's presence there?" demanded the Assessor, with as much triumph as though he had convicted an accused person of some crime. "What was the Countess doing at the forester's station, which lies six miles from Rakowicz, and belongs to the Wilicza property? We know the part both she and the Princess have taken in the present movement. In this confounded country the women are the most dangerous of all. They know everything, manage everything; the whole political network of intrigues is woven by their hands, and Countess Morynska is her father's true daughter, her aunt's most proficient pupil. Her presence at the station is proof enough of a conspiracy, proof clear as day! She hates her cousin with all the fanaticism of her people; it was she, and she alone, who planned this murderous surprise. That was why she appeared so suddenly among them, in the midst of the tumult, as though she had risen from the ground; that was why she tried to tear the revolver from Herr Nordeck's hand when he levelled it at Osiecki. She urged and stimulated the ranger and his men on to attack their master. But this Waldemar does not do things by halves! Not only did he subdue the mutiny, but he took the arch-instigator into safe custody, and brought her away with him by force to Wilicza. In spite of her struggles and resistance, he dragged his treacherous cousin out from the midst of her partisans, lifted her into the sledge, and drove off as for the very life. Just imagine, during the whole journey he never once addressed her—not a syllable did they exchange; but he never loosed his hold on her hand for an instant. He was determined to frustrate any attempt at flight. I am fully informed of it all. I have examined the coachman minutely on the subject ..."

"Yes, you were examining him for three mortal hours, until the poor fellow lost his head, and said yes to everything," interrupted the steward. "From his post outside the window he could not make out all the details of what was passing. He could only see an angry crowd, in the midst of which stood his master and Countess Morynska. Then came the two shots, and by his own confession he at once rushed off to his horse in the greatest alarm. You put all the rest in his mouth. Herr Nordeck's deposition is the only reliable one."

The Assessor looked greatly offended. He felt very much inclined to assume all the dignity of his office as representative of the L— police, whose proceedings were thus lightly esteemed and criticised in his; but he bethought himself in time that it was his father-in-law elect who was taking the liberty of setting him right, and such things must be tolerated and passed over, in consideration of their future close relationship. It was a sad pity, though, that the steward should not feel a more becoming respect for his son-in-law's infallible instinct in all official matters! Hubert gulped down his annoyance and only replied, in rather an irritated tone—

"Herr Nordeck is giving himself sovereign airs as usual. He vouchsafed me the information in as laconic a manner as possible; he would enter into no particulars, and refused point-blank when I expressed a wish to put some questions to Countess Morynska, alleging as a pretext that his cousin was unwell. Then he takes upon himself to give orders and make arrangements, exactly as if I were not there; and behaves as though no one but he had a word to say in the business. He would hush it up altogether if he could. 'Herr Nordeck,' said I to him, 'you are completely in error in regarding this

occurrence merely as an explosion of private hatred. The question lies far deeper. _I_ can see through it. It was a planned and premeditated insurrection, a prematurely developed conspiracy, directed against you, no doubt, in the first instance, but which had far wider aims in view. It was a conspiracy against order, against law, against the Government. We must sift this matter thoroughly; we must take all necessary measures.' What do you think he replied? 'Herr Assessor, you are completely in error in attributing the importance of a State conspiracy to an ill-conditioned fellow's violent assault on me. There is no end to be gained by your enquiry, now that all the men concerned have taken flight; and in the utter failure of traitors and conspirators you would be obliged to fall back on Dr. Fabian and myself, as happened to you on a previous occasion. It is in your own interest, therefore, that I must beg of you to moderate your zeal. I have provided you with the necessary material for your reports to L—. As to any disturbance of law or order here at Wilicza, you need feel no anxiety on that score. I imagine that I alone should be equal to any emergency which might arise.' With that he made me a cold majestic bow, and turned on his heel."

The steward laughed. "He has got that from his mother. I know the style. Princess Baratowska has often nearly driven me wild with it. No just anger, no consciousness of being in the right will avail a man against that grand, calm way of theirs. It is a peculiar form of superiority, which is imposing in spite of everything, and in which Prince Leo, for instance, is altogether deficient. He allows his hasty temper to get the better of him continually. It is only the elder son who has inherited this trait; at such times one might fancy his mother herself was there before one, though he is little enough like her in a general way. But Herr Nordeck is right in this. Moderate your zeal. It has brought you into trouble once already."

"Such is my fate," said the Assessor, resignedly. "With the noblest aims, with unwearying devotion, and the most ardent zeal for the welfare of the State, I earn nothing but ingratitude, misconstruction, and neglect. I persist in my opinion. It was a conspiracy. I had unearthed one at last, and now it slips through my fingers. Osiecki is dead, his men have fled, no confession can be extracted from Countess Morynska. If only I had gone over to the station yesterday! This morning I found it empty. It is my destiny ever to arrive too late!"

The steward cleared his throat in a marked manner. He thought he would take advantage of Hubert's elegiac humour to bring the conversation round to the subject of his wooing, and then and there roundly to declare to him that he must entertain no hopes of winning his daughter's hand. Gretchen had not thought better of it, but had persisted in her refusal; and her father was about to crush the poor lover with this afflicting disclosure, when Waldemar's coachman—the same who had driven his master and Countess Morynska on the preceding day, and who since then had been a victim to the Assessor's constant cross-examinations—entered the room with a message from Herr Nordeck.

It was all over now with Hubert's resignation, all over too with his attention for other things. He forgot past misconstruction and neglect; remembering only that he had several most important questions to put to the coachman, he dragged that unfortunate witness, in spite of all Frank's protests, up with him to his own room, there to proceed with the examination with renewed vigour.

The steward shook his head. He himself began now to incline to the opinion that there was something morbid about the Assessor's mind; it dawned upon him that his daughter might, after all, not be so far wrong in refusing this suitor whose furious official zeal was so hard to moderate, and whose fixed ideas on the subject of general and all-pervading conspiracies were proof against all argument.

Just at this moment, however, Gretchen happened to be following the Assessor's example. She too was cross-questioning, and that in a very thorough and businesslike manner, the person who was closeted with her in the parlour, and who was no other than our old friend, Dr. Fabian. He had been obliged to report in detail all that he had heard from Herr Nordeck of yesterday's event. Unfortunately he had little more news to tell than what was already current in the steward's house. Waldemar had told the Doctor what he had told every one else; confining himself to the bare facts of the case, and

maintaining an absolute silence with regard to much that was interesting—with regard, for instance, to the part Countess Morynska had played in the drama. This, however, was precisely the point which Gretchen Frank desired to have cleared up. Hubert's assertion that the young Countess hated her cousin, that she had even planned the surprise at the forester's house, did not quite approve itself to her mind. With true womanly instinct, she divined some far different and secretly existing relation between the two, and she grew very cross on finding that no more accurate information was to be obtained.

"You don't understand how to use your influence, Doctor," said she, reproachfully. "If I were Herr Nordeck's friend and confidant, I should have rather a better knowledge of his affairs. He would have to come and confess the most trifling thing to me. I should have trained him to it from the first."

The Doctor smiled a little. "You would hardly have succeeded in that. It is not so easy to train a nature such as Waldemar's in any particular course, and communicative you certainly never could have made him. He never feels the need of speaking his thoughts, of unburthening his mind to another person. Trouble and gladness alike he keeps to himself. Those about him see nothing of it, and one must know him long and intimately, as I have known him, to find out that he is capable of any deep emotion."

"Naturally enough—he has no heart," said Gretchen, who was always very ready with her judgments. "One can see that at a glance. He chills the room directly he comes into it, and I begin to shiver whenever he speaks to me. All Wilicza has learned to fear, but not a single creature to love him; and in spite of the friendliness and the consideration he has shown us, he is just as great a stranger even to my father as on the day of his arrival. I am convinced he has never loved any human being—certainly no woman. He is perfectly heartless."

"Pardon me, Fräulein,"—Fabian grew quite hot as he answered her—"you do him great injustice there. He has heart enough, more than you fancy; more perhaps than that fiery, passionate young Prince Baratowski. But Waldemar does not know how, perhaps does not wish, to show it. Even as a boy I noticed this trait in him, this close, persistent reserve; for years I strove in vain to overcome it, until a chance occurrence, a danger threatening me, all at once broke the ice between us. From that hour I learned to know Waldemar as he really is."

"Well, amiable he is not, that is certain," decided Gretchen. "I can't understand how you can be so tenderly attached to him. You were almost distracted yesterday when you heard of the peril he had passed through, and something must have happened up at the Castle again to-day, for you are quite cross and excited. I saw it directly you came in. Come, confess to me at once. Is Herr Nordeck menaced by any fresh trouble?"

"No, no," said the Doctor, hastily. "It has nothing to do with Waldemar—this matter concerns myself alone. It has excited me a little, certainly; but as to being cross—oh no, I certainly am not that, Fräulein. I have had news from J— this morning."

"Has that scientific and historic monster, Professor Schwarz, been annoying you again?" asked the young lady, with as warlike a demeanour as though she were ready to throw down the glove and do battle with that celebrated man on the spot.

Fabian shook his head. "I fear it is I who am to bring annoyance on him this time, though I may truly say, in a manner altogether independent of my will. You know that it was my 'History of Teutonism' which was the original ground of contest between him and Professor Weber. This contest has grown hotter and hotter, until at last it has passed all bounds. Schwarz, with his hasty temper, irritated too by the importance they attached to my book, allowed himself to be so far carried away as to stoop to personal invective and to unwarrantable rudeness towards his colleague; and, when the whole University declared itself on Weber's side, he threatened to send in his resignation. He only meant, by so doing, to show them how indispensable he was—he never seriously thought of leaving J—; but his harsh, imperious manners have made him many enemies among the leading personages there. In short, no attempt was made to detain him, and what he merely intended as a threat was accepted

as an accomplished fact. He had no choice but to persist in the resolution he had so publicly avowed. It is decided now that he is to leave the University."

"A very good thing for the University," said Gretchen, drily; "but I do really believe you are capable of worrying yourself with remorse about the business. It would be just like you."

"That is not all," said Fabian, in a low, hesitating voice. "There is some talk of—of my taking his place. Professor Weber writes me word that they intend offering me the chair which has become vacant—offering it to me, a simple private scholar, who can boast of no academic usefulness, whose only merit lies in his book, the first he has published! It is something so unusual, so astounding, that at first I positively could not believe it. I really could not get over my surprise, my utter amazement."

Gretchen showed no amazement; she seemed to think it the most natural thing that could have happened. "Well, they have shown themselves very sensible," said she. "You are a man of much higher mark than Professor Schwarz. Your book is far superior to anything he ever wrote; and when you are once seated in his professorial chair, he will soon find his fame obscured."

"But, Fräulein, you don't know the Professor; you have not read his works," put in the Doctor, timidly.

"Never mind, I know you," declared the girl, rising superior to argument. "Of course you mean to accept the nomination?"

Fabian looked down, and some seconds passed before he answered—

"I hardly think so. Honourable as the distinction is to me, I do not venture to avail myself of it, for I fear I should not be equal to so important and prominent a post. The long years I have spent in retirement, in solitude over my books, have unfitted me for public life, and have made me quite incapable of meeting all those social calls upon me which such a position would entail. Finally—and this is the principal reason of all—I could not leave Waldemar, especially now when troubles are coming in upon him on all sides. I am the only person with whom he can be said to be on intimate terms, whose society he would miss. It would be the height of ingratitude on my part, if for the sake of some outward advantages"

"It would be the height of selfishness on Herr Nordeck's part, if he were to accept such a sacrifice," interrupted Gretchen. "Luckily, he is sure not to do so; he will never consent to your abandoning for his sake a career which must seem to you to comprise every earthly happiness."

"To me?" repeated the Doctor, sadly. "No, there you are mistaken. I have ever sought and found all my pleasure in study, and I looked upon it as a special favour from Providence when, in the pupil who at one time stood so coldly aloof from me, a true and faithful friend grew up. That which is called earthly happiness—a home, a family—I have never known, and am not likely now to learn. At this moment, when such undreamt-of success has come to me, it would be sheer presumption to covet that also. I can well afford to be satisfied with that which has fallen to my lot."

In spite of his resignation, the words sounded sorrowful enough; but his young listener was apparently not moved to pity. Her lip curled disdainfully.

"You are of a singular nature, Doctor. I should be in despair if I had to take so gloomy a view of life, to renounce all its bright side."

The Doctor smiled sadly. "All, with you it is very different. One who is young and attractive as you are, who has grown up in free and happy circumstances, has a right to expect—to demand all good things from life. May they be granted you in fullest measure! It is my earnest, my heartfelt wish; but, indeed, there can be no doubt of it. Assessor Hubert loves you."

"What has Assessor Hubert to do with my happiness?" flashed out Gretchen. "You alluded to this once before. What do you mean by it?"

Fabian was seized with dire confusion.

"I beg you to forgive me, if I have been indiscreet," he stammered. "I know that the circumstance is not made generally known at present; but the deep, the sincere interest I take in you must be my excuse, if I ..."

"If you what?" cried the girl, vehemently. "I do believe you seriously take me to be engaged to that stupid, tiresome Hubert, who talks of nothing the whole day long, but of conspiracies, and of his future grand Counsellorship."

"But, Fräulein," said Fabian, in utmost perplexity, "the Assessor himself told me last autumn that he had good grounds for his hopes, and that he could reckon with all confidence on your consent."

Gretchen sprang up with a bound which sent her chair flying backwards.

"There, it is out at last! But it is your fault, Doctor Fabian, your fault entirely. Don't look at me with that astonished, frightened face. It was you who misguided me into sending the Assessor to Janowo, where he caught his cold. For fear of his falling ill in earnest, I took charge of the patient myself. Ever since that time the fixed idea has rooted itself in his mind that I am in love with him, and when once he gets a fixed idea there is no curing him of it. You can see that by the nonsense he is always talking about plots."

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