

E.WERNER

UNDER A
CHARM. VOL. II

E. Werner
Under a Charm. Vol. II

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=34337610

Under a Charm: A Novel. Vol. II:

Содержание

PART THE SECOND	4
CHAPTER III	5
CHAPTER IV	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

E. Werner
Under a Charm:
A Novel. Vol. II
PART THE SECOND

(Continued.)

CHAPTER III

At an early hour on the following morning the Castle guests, most of whom had spent the night beneath its roof, took their departure; only Count Morynski and his daughter remained at Wilicza. As the young proprietor's arrival had surprised them there, courtesy required that they should address to him some words of greeting before leaving his house; the Count, however, considered that, in the utter absence of all intimacy between himself and his nephew, he would be acting with propriety in leaving the latter exclusively to his mother for the first few hours succeeding their meeting, and Wanda was even less eager to assert the claims of relationship.

The Princess was alone with her two sons. She sat in her accustomed place in the green drawing-room, with Waldemar opposite her, and Leo standing by his brother's chair—to all appearances a peaceful, united family group.

"No, Waldemar, I really cannot forgive you for this," said the lady, in reproachful tones. "To stop at the steward's! As though your castle were not at your command at any instant of the day! as though it would not have been a pleasure to me to introduce you to my guests! I am almost tempted to look on what you term a mark of consideration for me as something quite the contrary. I really cannot let your fear of causing a disturbance serve you as a pretext."

"Well, let my disinclination to come into a crowd of strangers the moment I arrived serve me as such, then," replied Waldemar. "I really was not in the humour for it."

"Have you still the old antipathy to everything like society? In that case we shall have to narrow our connections here at Wilicza."

"Not on my account, I hope. I beg of you not to think of me in the matter—only you must excuse me if I do not put in a very frequent appearance in your *salon*. I have, it is true, learned to submit to the exigencies of society when there is no avoiding them, but they are still troublesome to me."

The Princess smiled. This tendency, of which she had so long been aware, accorded exactly with her wishes. Indeed, everything in this first meeting went to show that she had not erred in her judgment of Waldemar, that his nature had remained fundamentally the same. There was no marked change even in his personal appearance. His great height was more noticeable now than formerly, because he carried himself more erect, towering far above his tall and slender brother; and the unripeness, the undeveloped lines of youth had given place to a perfect manliness of form and bearing which, however, failed to make him more genial or interesting than of yore. Those plain irregular features could never be attractive, although the passion and vehemence, which in the old days so often disfigured them, had yielded to an expression of cold gravity. One decided advantage Waldemar possessed; his light hair, 'the enormous yellow mane,' as Wanda

used satirically to call it, had been cultivated and restrained in its luxuriant wild abundance. Its thick masses were brushed back close to his head, leaving the forehead and temples free; and a fine powerful brow it indisputably was, arched over the sombre eyes, the one beauty Nature had vouchsafed to the young man. The rough abruptness of his manner had been in a great measure toned down. It was evident that he was now familiar with the usages of society, and able to comply with them without visible constraint; but there the list of his acquisitions during these years of University life and of travel ended. An ornament to a drawing-room Waldemar Nordeck would never be. There was a stand-off, repellant air about him, a lack of affability; his whole being bore too distinctly the stamp of a close and sombre reserve for any one ever to feel instinctively drawn to him.

The contrast between the brothers was even more striking than in former days. Leo, too, had left far behind him the boy of seventeen; but if, even at that early age, his appearance had extracted from old Witold the admission that his enemy's son was 'a picture of a boy,' he now displayed all the beauty of his people—a beauty which, where it exists at all, frequently attains to a rare perfection. Somewhat shorter, but far more slender than Waldemar, he possessed in fullest measure all those advantages which his elder brother lacked: the nobility of feature, bringing into strongest relief his speaking likeness to his mother; the splendid dark eyes, which flashed fire with every passing emotion; the dark wavy hair, lying in soft and shining curls

about his brow. There was a touch of the romantic about the young Prince's whole person, happily married to the distinction and refinement of a modern gentleman. Leo Baratowski was a perfect type of beauty and of chivalry.

"So you have actually brought your old tutor with you?" said he, gaily. "Well, I wonder at your taste, Waldemar. I was glad when my worthy preceptor had nothing more to do with me, and should never have dreamed of taking him as my companion to the University, still less as my fellow-traveller."

The frigid constraint which always characterised young Nordeck's manner when conversing with his mother, relaxed to a great extent now, as he turned to the last speaker.

"You must not look on Dr. Fabian merely in the light of a tutor, Leo. He has long ago given up teaching, and now devotes himself solely to his historical studies. It was only his want of means which made him take to his old profession. He has always been a scholar at heart; but has never known how to turn his learning to practical account, so there was nothing left him but to turn 'bear-leader.'"

"His vocation was evident enough. He had all the pedantry and dry-as-dust manner of a *savant*," said the Princess.

"Were you not satisfied with his reports?" asked Waldemar, coolly.

"With what reports?"

"Those the Doctor used to send you when I first went to the University," returned Waldemar. "He was in some doubt as to

what you really wanted to know, so I advised him to keep you thoroughly informed on the subject of my studies. He was explicit enough, I think."

The Princess was startled. "You seem to be acquainted with all the details of our correspondence, and even to have—superintended it to some degree."

"Dr. Fabian has no secrets from me, and I thought it natural you would like to hear about my studies," replied Waldemar, so equably that a sudden suspicion of his having possibly seen through certain plans of hers in former days vanished again from his mother's mind. She fancied she had detected irony in his first remarks, but a glance at that imperturbable face reassured her. Impossible! Neither he nor his whilom tutor had the wit to penetrate so deeply below the surface.

"Leo is delighted at the idea of acting as your guide in your shooting expeditions in and about Wilicza," said she, changing the subject. "I must make up my mind to see very little of either of you for the next few weeks."

Waldemar looked up at his brother, who was still leaning against his chair.

"I am only afraid, Leo, that your idea of sport will prove to be very different to mine. Even as a sportsman, you will be anxious to preserve a gentlemanly appearance, so as to be ready in case of need to go straight from the woods into a drawing-room, whereas, with me, you would have to go through the bushes, and often enough through the bogs and fens, after the game. Who

knows how that would suit you!"

The young Prince laughed. "I think you will find that sport here in the woods of Poland is rather a more serious thing than on your peaceful old hunting-grounds at Altenhof. You will soon be able to judge whether one finds one's self always in such irreproachable feather after, say, a chance encounter with the wolves. I have had many an adventure, and as Wanda is also passionately fond of hunting ... You know she is here, at Wilicza?"

The question came suddenly, unexpectedly; it was put with a sort of eager anxiety. Waldemar's tone, on the other hand, was calm and tranquil as he replied—

"Countess Morynska? Yes. I heard so."

"Countess Morynska!" repeated the Princess, reproachfully. "She is your cousin, and will soon stand to you in a closer relationship. Leo, you will tell your brother that which is still a secret as regards the rest of the world?"

"Certainly," answered the young Prince, quickly; "you must be told, of course, Waldemar, that—that Wanda is engaged to me."

His eyes scanned his brother's face closely as he said the last words, and for one second the Princess's keen look rested on it also; but not the slightest trace of agitation was to be seen there. Waldemar's features remained absolutely immovable. His manner, too, was unruffled; he did not even alter his easy, half-negligent attitude.

"Engaged to you? Really?"

"It does not appear to surprise you," said Leo, rather disconcerted at this equanimity.

"No," replied Waldemar, coldly. "I know you were always attached to your cousin, and can imagine that neither my mother nor Count Morynski would place obstacles in the way. I wish you all happiness, Leo."

The young Prince took the offered hand with real and hearty warmth. It had been rather painful to him to touch upon this topic. He felt he had done his brother a wrong, that he and Wanda had trifled with his feelings most thoughtlessly and unkindly; and the calm with which Waldemar received the news afforded him considerable relief. The Princess, who herself attached no importance to these bygone matters, but perceived that the subject should not be treated at any length, hastened to introduce another.

"You will see Wanda and her father no later than to-day," said she, carelessly. "We have, of course, a good deal of communication with Rakowicz. But, in the first place, what do you think of your Wilicza? You did not keep your word with us. When we were at C— you promised to pay us a visit in the following spring, and full four years have elapsed before you have really made up your mind to come."

"I have always meant to perform my promise, and never succeeded in doing it."

He got up and walked to the great centre window. "But you are right, Wilicza has grown pretty nearly strange to me. I must

go over the whole place in the course of the next few days, so as to get to feel at home here."

The Princess grew attentive. "The whole place? I do not think you will find much to interest you, except the forests, which will have a special charm for so ardent a sportsman as yourself. With regard to Wilicza itself, the steward will give you all the information you require. He has probably told you that he intends giving up his post?" The question was put incidentally; there was no sign of the suspense with which the answer to it was awaited.

"Yes," said Waldemar, looking through the window absently. "He is going in the spring."

"I am sorry for it for your sake, all the more that I am the indirect cause of your losing a clever and capable *employé*. Frank will, in many respects, be hard to replace. His management, for instance, is generally considered quite a model for imitation. Unfortunately, his activity requires the permanent absenteeism of his principal, for he can suffer no other authority where he is. His people complain bitterly of his want of consideration, and I myself have had proofs of it. I was forced, at last, seriously to remind him that neither the Castle nor the Princess Baratowska was under his sway, and it was one of these scenes which brought about his resignation. Now all depends upon which side you take, Waldemar. I think the steward would not be disinclined to stay on, if you were to accord him permission to play the master as heretofore. I shall, of course, abide by your decision."

Young Nordeck waived the subject. "I only arrived yesterday

evening, and cannot possibly understand all the bearings of the case as yet," he replied, with a significant gesture. "If Frank wishes to go, I shall not keep him here; and if differences between himself and the Castle are the cause of his departure, you do not imagine, I hope, that I shall put my mother in a false position by taking part against her and siding with the steward."

The Princess breathed freely. She had not been without uneasiness with regard to Frank. Her son was only to have entered into relations with him when he had learned to see with her eyes, and had become thoroughly prejudiced against his agent. With the latter's straightforward plain-speaking, and the young proprietor's violent temper, which could not brook the slightest contradiction, a collision would then have been inevitable; but now this unlooked-for and most unbecoming visit to the manor-farm had marred the whole plan. Waldemar's manner conveyed, however, that, during the short time he had been there, he had entered into no discussion. He appeared to attach little importance to the steward's going or staying, and possessed, as it seemed, sufficient sense of decorum to range himself at the outset, and without any preliminary examination, on his mother's side.

"I knew I could count upon you," she declared, well satisfied with this first meeting. Everything was fitting in to meet her wishes. "But we have fallen at once on this disagreeable business topic, as if we had nothing better to occupy us. I wished ... Oh, you are there, Bronislaus!" She turned to her brother, who at this

moment entered the room with his daughter on his arm.

At the last words Waldemar had also turned. For an instant he seemed confounded, so strange to him was the tall proud figure now standing before him. He had only known the maiden of sixteen, with her fresh, youthful graces; the present vision may well have appeared altogether new to him. 'She gives promise of beauty,' the Princess Baratowska had said of her niece; but that lady herself could hardly have foreseen how fully her prophecy would be justified. Beauty, in this case, did not, it is true, consist in the regularity of outline, for Wanda's features were not regular. The Slavonic type was too distinctly portrayed in them, and they differed considerably from the Greek or Roman ideal; but, nevertheless, there was an irresistible charm in the still somewhat pale face which none could arm himself against. Her raven hair, dressed very simply in opposition to the reigning fashion, was by this unstudied art displayed in all its rich abundance; but the young Countess's mightiest seduction lay in her dewy dark eyes, which gazed out, clear and full, from under the long eyelashes. There was more in them now than childish petulance and childish gaiety. Whether those deep dark eyes were veiled in dreamy stillness, or beaming radiant with passionate ardour, enigmatic and dangerous were they ever. One glance at them would show how they could fascinate and hold captive without hope of rescue, and the Countess Morynska had too often tested their power not to be thoroughly conscious of its extent.

"You have taken all Wilicza by surprise, Waldemar," said the

Count, "and you come home to find guests staying in your house. We were to have left early this morning, but on hearing of your arrival we could not deny ourselves the pleasure of seeing you before starting."

"That we certainly could not, Cousin Waldemar." Wanda confirmed her father's words, holding out her hand to the new-comer as she spoke, with an enchanting smile and the most perfect ease of manner.

Waldemar bowed to his beautiful cousin with measured formality. He seemed not to notice the proffered hand, or to have heard the gracious, familiar little address, for without a syllable of reply he turned to Morynski.

"I hope I am not driving you away, Count. As, for the time being, I am only my mother's guest, we are both in similar case."

The Count seemed agreeably impressed by this politeness, of which he had not thought his nephew capable. He answered pleasantly, while Wanda stood by mute, with lips tightly pressed together. She had proposed to herself to meet her young relation with the unembarrassed demeanour of a woman of the world, generously to spare him a painful reminiscence by herself altogether ignoring it; and now she must endure to see her ease of manner unremarked, her generosity repelled. That glance of icy indifference showed her that Waldemar, though he had forgotten the old attachment, had not forgiven the old offence, for which he was now taking his revenge.

The conversation soon grew general, the Princess and Leo

now joining in it. Subject matter was not wanting. They spoke of Waldemar's travels, of his unexpected advent, of Wilicza and the neighbourhood; but animated as the talk might be, it never became intimate or familiar. The language was that used to a stranger who chanced to be on a footing of relationship. This offshoot of the Nordecks had nothing really in common with the Morynski and Baratowski circle, and the fact being felt on all sides, the whole tone of the interview was involuntarily affected by it. The Count could not prevail on himself to adopt towards his sister's elder son the familiar form of address which came as a matter of course when speaking to the younger; and Waldemar, taking his cue therefrom, continued to call his uncle "Count." He showed himself now much as he had been of old, silent and reserved, but no longer awkward.

The season being autumn, hunting was naturally the topic which came uppermost. It was indeed the favourite pastime of all the country round, even the ladies entering into it with zest. The two now present took a lively part in the discussion. Leo at length mentioned the great Nordeck collection of arms, and especially vaunted some rifles which formed part of it. Count Morynski differed from his nephew, declaring that the pieces, though certainly of great value, were chiefly to be viewed in the light of curiosities, while Waldemar unhesitatingly sided with his brother. The gentlemen waxed hot in the defence of their theories, and resolved to decide the question at issue by an adjournment to the armoury and a provisional trial of the guns.

They went off immediately to put the matter to the test.

"Still the old Waldemar!" said the Princess, looking after them. "He warms to nothing but to these sporting details. All else is indifferent to him. Do you think him altered, Wanda?"

"Yes," replied the young Countess, laconically. "He has grown strangely quiet."

"Yes, thank Heaven, he seems in some measure to have laid aside his abrupt, unmannerly ways, while he is in the drawing-room, at least. One can introduce him now without exposing one's self to ridicule, and without having reason to dread an *éclat* in the midst of the most ordinary conversation. Those who are brought into close contact with him will probably still have much to endure. The first blunder made by a groom with regard to the dogs or horses will bring out the old Berserker in him, with all his old fierceness and violence."

Wanda made no reply to this remark. She had thrown herself into an armchair, and was playing with its silken tassels.

"His coming in that way was a true Nordeck proceeding," went on the Princess, in a tone of annoyance. "It was bad enough that he should dismiss the post-chaise at the last station, and continue the journey on foot like any adventurer, but that would naturally not suffice Waldemar. When he saw the Castle lighted up, and heard it was a reception night here, he turned into the steward's in all haste, for fear he should be obliged to show himself in company. Later in the evening he came up to the Castle with the Doctor, made himself known to Pawlick, and had

himself shown to his rooms, giving most strenuous orders that I was not to be disturbed. I, of course, heard of his arrival before five minutes were over. My servants are better trained than he supposes. As he had given such strict injunctions on the subject, I had no choice, however, but to ignore his presence, and allow myself to be taken by surprise this morning."

"A surprise which constrained us to remain on here," put in Wanda, impatiently. "I hope papa may come back soon, that we may start."

"Not at once? You will at least stay to dinner."

"No, dear aunt, I shall beg papa to have the horses put to immediately. Do you think it can be agreeable to me to sit here and be ignored by Herr Waldemar Nordeck, as he has thought fit to ignore me for the last half-hour? He avoided with admirable consistency either answering or addressing a word to me."

The Princess smiled. "Well, well, you can afford to grant him that small vengeance on your first meeting. You played with him rather unmercifully, you know, and can hardly wonder if he shows a little rancour now and then. That will pass away when you see more of each other. What do you think of his appearance?"

"I think it is just as disagreeable as ever," declared the young Countess; "more so, for then the impression it created was an involuntary one, and now I almost fancy he wishes to repel. Nevertheless, I don't know why—unless it be that his brow is so clear and open—but he is no longer at a disadvantage beside Leo."

The Princess was silent. The same remark had been borne in on her mind as the two stood together. Incontestable as was the younger brother's beauty, the elder, though unable to make the smallest pretension to good looks, was no longer in danger of being thrust into the background. Should his person appear to others, as to Countess Morynska, disagreeable, nay, repulsive, there was yet a certain something in his bearing and manner which would maintain him in his proper place. His mother herself was forced to admit as much.

"These giants always have one great advantage," said she; "they are imposing at first sight, but that is all. You must never look for mind or strength of character in them."

"Never?" said Wanda, with a peculiar expression. "Are you quite sure?"

The Princess seemed to think the question a strange and superfluous one; she looked at her niece in astonishment.

"We both know what ends Wilicza has now to serve," the latter continued, with suppressed vehemence, "and you must acknowledge, dear aunt, that it would be very inconvenient and dangerous should it suddenly occur to your son to show any 'mind.' Be prudent. That quiet manner and, above all, that brow of his are not to my liking."

"My dear," said the elder lady, with calm superiority, "will you not allow me to be the judge of my son's character; or do you imagine that, at twenty years of age, you possess greater powers of discernment than any I am endowed with? Waldemar

is a Nordeck—that is saying everything."

"I know you have always summed up your judgment of him in those words. He may be the exact image of his father in every other feature; but that forehead, with its sharply defined blue vein, he has from you. Does it seem to you a thing impossible that he may one day show himself his mother's son?"

"Utterly impossible," the Princess declared in a harsh tone, as though the notion were really insulting to her. "All of myself I have had power to transmit, Leo alone has inherited. Do not be foolish, Wanda. You are irritated at Waldemar's behaviour to yourself, and I admit it was not very flattering; but you really must take his susceptibility into some account. How you manage to discover strength of character in this tenacious clinging to an old grudge, I cannot understand—to me it proves just the contrary. Any one else would have felt grateful to you for endeavouring to put aside a painful half-forgotten souvenir, and would have met you with an ease of manner equal to your own. As his brother's betrothed ..."

"Does Waldemar know already?" the young Countess interrupted.

"Yes, Leo told him himself."

"And how did he take the news?"

"With the most perfect indifference, although I never gave him a hint of it in my letters. That is precisely it. He soon got over his old romantic feeling for you—we have proof of that—but he clings to the fancied offence with all the obstinacy of his boyhood. Do

you wish me to take that as the mark of a strong mind?"

Wanda rose in unmistakable anger. "Certainly not; but I feel no inclination to expose myself further to his obstinacy, and you will therefore excuse us, dear aunt, if we leave Wilicza at once. Nothing would induce me to remain, and papa will hardly let me set out alone. We shall start within the hour."

The Princess protested in vain. Once again she had experience of the fact that her niece owned a will as resolute as her own, and that, where his daughter was concerned, 'there were no limits to Count Morynski's weakness.' In spite of his sister's wishes repeatedly expressed, in spite of Leo's most evident vexation, the plan decided on by Wanda was carried out, and half an hour later the carriage which was to convey her and her father to Rakowicz drove up to the door.

CHAPTER IV

Some weeks had passed by, and the young proprietor's arrival had wrought no change worth mentioning at Wilicza. His presence was hardly noticed, for, as the Princess had rightly supposed, he was seldom at the Castle, but spent his days roaming about the forests and surrounding neighbourhood. The old passion for sport seemed to have taken possession of him again, and to throw everything else into the shade. He did not even appear regularly at meal times. His wanderings generally led him so far afield that he was forced to turn into some ranger's house, or into some farm for refreshment. This was of very frequent occurrence. On such occasions he would return late and tired out, and would spend his evenings chiefly in his own rooms, in Dr. Fabian's company, only appearing when obliged so to do in his mother's drawing-room.

After the first few days Leo had given up going with his brother, for it turned out, indeed, that the two differed very widely in their ideas on the subject of sport. The young Prince was in this, as in all else, rash, fiery, but not enduring. He shot all that came within reach of his barrel, scouted no obstacle when in pursuit, and found a decided pleasure in anything which added a spice of danger to the work in hand. Waldemar, on the other hand, followed with tenacious, indefatigable perseverance, the whole day through, if necessary, the game he had selected at the

outset, giving no thought to rest or recruitment, and imposing on himself fatigue and hardships which only his iron frame could have withstood. Leo soon began to find it wearisome both to body and mind, and unpleasant to the last degree; so that, on making the discovery that his brother greatly preferred to be alone, he was very glad to leave him to his own society.

Thus, though the three daily saw and spoke to each other, it could hardly be said that they lived a life in common. Waldemar's stern, almost repellant manner had in no way changed, and his reserve grew rather than diminished in this closer intercourse. After weeks passed under the same roof, neither the Princess nor Leo had advanced a step nearer intimacy with him than on the day of his arrival; but such intimacy was not needful. They were glad that the young man's conduct tallied so completely with the suppositions they had formed. As regarded social relations, he even showed a docility they had not expected. For instance, he did not refuse to make a return visit to Rakowicz, and the communications between the two castles were more frequent than ever. Count Morynski and his daughter often came over to Wilicza, though they but seldom found the master of the house at home. The only thing which occasionally caused the Princess some annoyance was the attitude preserved towards each other by her elder son and Wanda. This remained absolutely unchanged; it was cold, constrained, hostile even. The mother had tried several times to step in and mediate, but always unsuccessfully. At last she gave up the idea of curing two 'stubborn young heads' of their

obstinacy. The whole thing was unimportant, except as it might give pretext for a rupture. Matters, however, were not carried to such lengths. Waldemar was always as gracious to the Count as his ungracious nature would permit; and, for the rest, he did his relatives the pleasure, of withdrawing from their society as much as possible, so leaving them to their own devices.

All Wilicza was astir, it being an occasion of one of those great hunting festivities which were wont to gather the whole neighbourhood together at the Castle. As usual, every invitation issued had been accepted, and the company, which consisted exclusively of the Polish nobility from the surrounding chateaux, was more numerous than ever. Great was the Princess's satisfaction that she had not been forced to modify her arrangements out of regard to her son. She would naturally have so far sacrificed herself as to regulate the invitations according to his wishes, but no such question was ever mooted. Waldemar seemed to take it as a thing of course that his mother's circle of acquaintance should now be his; and, seeing the very small part he took in such social relations, the matter may well have appeared immaterial to him. He himself held intercourse with no one in the neighbourhood; he even avoided those connections which the Princess had thought of not without apprehension, and made friends neither among the higher class of officials at L—, nor the officers of that garrison, though he had met most of the latter in other places. In these circles young Nordeck was looked on as belonging altogether

to the Baratowski faction, and as being completely under the influence of his mother, who would, it was declared, permit no foreign element so much as to approach him.

The hunting party was unusually late in setting out. A solid wall of thick fog, drawn up round the house and closing in the view a few paces off, had in the morning threatened to interfere with the whole expedition. A little before noon, however, it cleared sufficiently for the programme to be put into execution, with this single exception that the breakfast was taken at the Castle, instead of in the forest.

Part of the guests were already making ready to start. The gentlemen and younger ladies who were to join in the hunt, were taking leave of the Princess, as she stood with Leo in the centre of the great drawing-room. Any one unacquainted with the real circumstances must have supposed the young Prince to be the master of Wilicza, for he and his mother formed the central point to which all converged. They accepted all the polite speeches, claimed all the attentions and interest of the company, and did the honours with a distinction and dignity of bearing which left nothing to be desired; while Waldemar stood at the window, apart and almost overlooked, in conversation with Dr. Fabian, who, as a matter of course, was to remain behind at the Castle, but who had come down to join the breakfast party.

This demeanour on the part of the head of the house struck no one as strange, he having always voluntarily chosen this subordinate *rôle*. He seemed persistently to consider himself as

his mother's guest who had nothing to do with the entertainment of visitors, and declined all participation in it as troublesome and disagreeable to him. So the custom had gradually grown up of paying no special regard to one who made so little claim to consideration. Gracious words were spoken to him on coming and going. When he condescended to take part in the conversation, he was listened to with some show of attention, and the sacrifice was even made of speaking German in his presence, great and general as was the objection felt to that language; but, in spite of this, he was only nominally master in his own home, and it was known that his passivity in this capacity was a thing of great price. All vain attempts to break through the obstinate reserve in which he delighted to enwrap himself had long been abandoned; and, on the whole, the guests assembled beneath his roof took no more notice of him than he of them.

"Pray do not ride so wildly again, Leo," remonstrated the Princess, as she parted from her younger son with an embrace. "You and Wanda seem to vie with one another in attempting the most hazardous feats. I seriously beg of you to be prudent on this occasion;" and, turning to her elder son, who now came up to her, she held out her hand with cool affability. "Goodbye, Waldemar; you must be quite in your element to-day."

"That I certainly am not," was the somewhat ill-humoured answer. "These great conventional gala meets, when the woods are full of traqueurs and huntsmen, and the game is driven right before your barrel for you to shoot without any trouble, are

decidedly not to my taste."

"Waldemar is never happy but when he is alone with his beloved rifle," said Leo, laughing. "I have a strong suspicion that you dragged me through the thickest bushes and over the deepest bogs, and exposed me to hunger and thirst, with the settled purpose of getting rid of me as soon as possible. I am not exactly a novice in such matters, but after the first three days I had enough of the horrible toil you call pleasure."

"I told you beforehand that our views on the subject would differ," said Waldemar, coolly, as the two left the drawing-room together and went down the steps.

A number of the visitors had already assembled below on the great lawn before the Castle, and among them were Count Morynski and his daughter. The gentlemen were with one voice admiring Nordeck's beautiful horse, which he had but lately sent for and which had only arrived the day before. They acknowledged that, in this respect at least, the master of Wilicza had shown consummate taste.

"A splendid creature!" said the Count, patting the animal's slender neck, a caress received by its object with all due patience. "Waldemar, is this really the wild Norman you used to ride at C—? Pawlick was in great anguish of mind each time he had to hold his bridle, for the beast was dangerous then to all who went near him. He seems to have grown remarkably gentle."

Waldemar, who had just come out of the house with his brother, drew near the group.

"Norman was very young and new to the saddle in those days," said he. "He has learned to behave himself since then, just as I have learned to give up rough riding. But as to the gentleness of the animal, ask Leo what he thinks of it. He found out what it was worth when he tried to mount him yesterday."

"A devil of a horse!" cried Leo, in a tone of irritation. "I think you have trained him to go on like a mad creature directly any one but yourself puts his foot in the stirrup; but I will get the better of him yet."

"You had better let it alone. Norman obeys me, and no one but me. You will never get control over him. You might have found that out yesterday, I should have thought."

A dark flush spread over the young Prince's face. He had caught a look of Wanda's, imperiously calling on him to contradict the assertion. He did not comply exactly; but the look stung him and added fuel to his anger, as he replied with some heat—

"If it gives you any pleasure to break in your horse in such a manner that no one but yourself can mount him, that is your business. I have certainly not taught my Vaillant any such high art"—he pointed to the beautiful sorrel his groom was holding for him—"nevertheless, you would not fare much better with him than I with your Norman. You have never been willing to make the attempt. Will you try him to-day?"

"No," replied Waldemar, quietly. "Your horse is sometimes very refractory. You allow him to play all sorts of tricks, and

to show caprices which I could not stand. I should be under the necessity of ill-using him, and should be sorry to employ violence to your favourite. Your heart is set on him, I know."

"Well, there would be no harm in trying, Herr Nordeck," put in Wanda—she had dropped the familiar "Cousin Waldemar" once for all after their first meeting. "I really think you ride *nearly* as well as Leo."

Waldemar moved not a muscle at this attack. He remained perfectly composed.

"You are very kind to credit me with any skill in horsemanship, Countess Morynska," he replied.

"Oh, I meant no offence," declared Wanda, in a tone which was still more damaging than her previous word 'nearly.' "I am persuaded that the Germans are excellent equestrians; but they cannot, of course, compare with our gentlemen in the art of riding."

Nordeck turned to his brother without making any reply. "Will you leave your Vaillant to me for to-day, Leo? At all risks?"

"At all risks," cried Leo, with flashing eyes.

"Do not attempt it, Waldemar," interposed the Count, who appeared not to approve of the turn the matter had taken. "You have judged quite correctly. The horse is refractory, and quite unaccountable in his caprices; besides which, Leo has accustomed him to all sorts of rash adventures and mad tricks, so that no strange rider, were he the most skilful in the world, could be a match for him. He will throw you, without a shadow

of doubt."

"Well, Herr Nordeck may put it to the test, at least," suggested Wanda, "supposing he cares to incur the danger."

"Do not be uneasy," said Waldemar to the Count, who darted a displeased glance at his daughter. "I will ride the horse. You see how eager Countess Morynska is to—see me thrown. Come, Leo."

"Wanda, I must beg you to desist," whispered Morynski to his daughter. "A real feud is growing up between you and Waldemar. I must say you neglect no opportunity of irritating him."

The young Countess switched her whip sharply against her velvet habit. "You are wrong, papa. Irritate? This Nordeck never allows himself to be irritated, certainly not by me!"

"Well, why do you always return to the charge, then?"

Wanda made no answer; but her father had spoken truly. She could let pass no opportunity of exasperating the man who at one time had blazed up with passionate susceptibility at a thoughtless word, and who now met her every attack with the same imperturbable calm.

Meanwhile the attention of the others had been attracted to what was going on. They knew Nordeck to be a skilful, if a prudent rider; but it appeared to them a thing of course that he could not in this respect compare with a Baratowski, and, less considerate than Count Morynski, they heartily enjoyed the prospect of the 'foreigner's' defeat. The two brothers were standing by the sorrel now. The slender, fiery animal struck the

ground impatiently with its hoofs, and gave the groom at his head trouble enough to hold him. Leo took the bridle from the man's hands, and held the horse himself while his brother mounted, intense satisfaction beaming in his eyes as he did so—he knew his Vaillant. Then he let him go, and stepped back.

The sorrel had hardly felt the strange hand on his reins when he began to give proof of his peculiar temper. He reared, plunged, and made the most violent efforts to shake off his rider; but the latter sat as though glued to the saddle, and opposed so quiet but energetic a resistance to the animal's impetuous violence that at last it succumbed to its fate, and endured him.

But its docility went no further, for when Waldemar would have urged it forward it resolutely refused to obey. Nothing could induce it to stir from the spot. It spent itself in all manner of tricks and caprices; but no skilful management, no show of energy on the part of its rider, availed to make it advance a step. Gradually, however, it worked itself into a state of excitement which was really becoming serious. So far, Waldemar had remained tolerably quiet, but now his brow began to flush. His patience was at an end. He raised his whip, and struck the rebellious horse a merciless, well-directed blow.

This unwonted treatment drove the capricious, spoilt creature distracted. It gave one bound, scattering right and left the gentlemen standing round, and then shot like an arrow across the lawn into the great avenue which led to the Castle. There the ride degenerated into a wild struggle between horse and rider. The

former, frenzied with rage, fairly battled with its adversary, and visibly tried all the means in its power to unseat him. Though Waldemar kept his seat in the saddle, it was evident that he did so at extreme risk to his life.

"Leo, put a stop to this," said Morynski to his nephew, uneasily. "Vaillant will soon calm down if he hears your voice. Persuade your brother to dismount, or we shall have an accident."

Leo stood by with folded arms, watching the struggle; but he made no attempt to interfere. "I did not hide from Waldemar that the horse is a dangerous one for a stranger to mount," he replied, coldly. "If he purposely goads it into a fury, he must take the consequences. He knows well enough that Vaillant will not stand the whip."

At this moment Waldemar came back. He had retained sufficient control over the reins to force the animal into a given direction, for instead of careering over the lawn they swept round it in a wide circle. Beyond this, all guidance was out of the question. The sorrel still violently resisted the hand which held it in an iron grasp, and tried by unexpected lightning-like darts and plunges to throw its rider; but Nordeck's face showed that the old temper was rising within him. Scarlet to the roots of his hair, with eyes which seemed to emit sparks, and teeth tightly set, he used his whip and spurs in so merciless a manner that Leo grew wild with exasperation. He had looked on composedly at his brother's danger, but this punishment of his favourite was more than he could bear.

"Waldemar, have done," he cried, angrily. "You will ruin the horse for me. We have all seen now that Vaillant will carry you. Let him be."

"I shall teach him obedience first." Waldemar's voice vibrated with passion and excitement. He was past thinking of others now, and Leo's interference had no other effect than to bring down on the horse still more unsparing treatment, as a second time they made the tour of the lawn. At the third round the animal was vanquished. It no longer strove against its rider's will, but moderated into the prescribed pace, and at the first hint from the reins came to a halt before the Castle, completely subdued, it is true, but ready to sink with exhaustion.

Nordeck dismounted. The gentlemen gathered round him, and there was no lack of compliments on his admirable horsemanship, though the spirits of the company were evidently damped. Leo alone said nothing. He stood silent, stroking the trembling, sweating horse, on whose shining brown coat traces of blood were to be seen—so terribly had Waldemar's spurs ploughed his sides.

"That was a trial of strength I never saw equalled," said Count Morynski; but his words were forced. "Vaillant will not so easily forget the day he carried you."

Waldemar had already got the better of his passion. The flush on his brow and the full swollen blue vein on the temple alone bore witness to his inward excitement, as he answered—

"I had to try and deserve Countess Morynska's flattering

opinion that I could ride *nearly* as well as my brother."

Wanda stood by Leo's side, looking as though she had personally suffered a defeat which she was ready to avenge at the peril of her life, so threatening was the blaze of those deep dark eyes.

"I am sorry that my heedless words should have brought down such harsh usage on Vaillant. The noble creature is certainly not accustomed to such treatment."

"Nor I to such resistance," replied Waldemar, sharply. "It is not my fault if Vaillant would not yield to whip and spur. Yield he must, sooner or later."

Leo put an end to the conversation by ordering his groom, in a loud demonstrative manner, to lead the sorrel, which was 'ready to drop,' back to the stables, and there to take all possible care of him, and at once to saddle another horse and bring it round. Count Morynski, fearing an outbreak, went up to his nephew and drew him aside.

"Control yourself, Leo," he said, in a low urgent tone. "Do not appear before all these people with that frowning brow. Do you want to seek a quarrel with your brother?"

"What if I do?" muttered the young Prince. "Has not he exposed me to the ridicule of all the hunt by that ill-timed story of his about Norman? Has not he almost ridden my Vaillant to death? And all for the sake of a miserable boast!"

"Boast? Think what you are saying. It was you who proposed to him to try the horse. He refused at first."

"He wanted to show me and all of us that he is master when a mere display of coarse physical strength is in question. As though any one ever disputed him that! It is the only thing he is capable of! But I tell you, uncle, if he challenges me in this way again, my patience will give way. It would if he were ten times lord of Wilicza."

"No imprudence!" said the Count. "You and Wanda are unfortunately accustomed to subordinate everything to your own personal impressions. I can never obtain from her the smallest concession where this Waldemar is concerned."

"Wanda, at least, can show her dislike openly," grumbled Leo, "whereas I. There he is standing beside his Norman; together they look the very picture of composure and tranquillity, but let any one try to go near either of them!"

The fresh horse was now brought round, and in the general departure which ensued any little unpleasantness caused by the late incident was dissipated. It was, however, fortunate that the proceedings of the day kept the brothers apart, that they were at no time long in each other's company, else, in the exasperated state of Leo's mind, a rupture would have become inevitable. When at length the chase was reached, the love of sport awoke, and, for some hours at least, drove all else into the background.

Waldemar was wrong in his aversion to these 'great gala meets.' They presented a brilliant and beautiful spectacle, especially here at Wilicza, where such *fêtes* were conducted on a right princely scale. Each forest station was called on to furnish

its contingent of men in full gala uniform. The whole woodland district was alive, fairly swarming with foresters and huntsmen; but the most imposing sight of all was the *cortége* of the hunt itself as it careered along. The gentlemen, for the most part, fine noble-looking figures in well-appointed hunting dress, mounted on slender fiery steeds—the ladies in flowing habits riding by the side of their cavaliers, the servants bringing up the train; then the blast of horns and the baying of hounds. It was a scene all aglow with animation. Soon the stag came flitting by, and shots resounded on all sides, awakening the echoes and announcing the opening of the day's sport.

Now that the fog had lifted, the weather was all that could be wished. It was a cool, somewhat overcast, but fine November day. The stock of deer in the Wilicza chase was considered to be unrivalled, the arrangements were on all points excellent, and the game was most abundant. That every effort should be made to regain what had been lost in the morning was a thing of course. The short autumn afternoon was fast closing in, but no one thought of staying the sport at sight of the first shades of twilight.

Some thousand paces distant from the forester's house, which was to-day to serve as rendezvous, there lay a stretch of meadow, solitary and, as it were, lost in the midst of the encircling thickets. The close undergrowth and the mighty trees which fenced it in, made the spot invisible to all but those who knew where to find it, or who stumbled on it by accident. Now, indeed, that the chill

of autumn had in some degree thinned the surrounding foliage, access could be had to it more easily. In the midst of this piece of meadow-land lay a small lake or pond, such as is often to be found in the heart of the woods. During the summer months, with its waving reeds and dreamy water-lilies, it lent to the place a peculiar poetic charm of its own; but now it brooded dark and bare, fading leaves floating on its surface, its brink edged by a circle of brown discoloured grass, autumnally desolate like all its surroundings.

Under one of the trees, which stretched its boughs far out over the meadow, stood Countess Morynska, quite unattended and alone. Her retirement must have been a voluntary one. She could not have accidentally wandered from the hunt, for sounds of the gay party were to be heard distinct enough, though borne over from a distance, and close at hand stood the forester's house, where the young lady must have left her horse. She seemed purposely to have sought, and wishful to preserve, her present solitude. Leaning against the trunk of a tree, she gazed fixedly at the water, and yet plainly saw neither it nor any other feature of the landscape before her. Her thoughts were elsewhere. Wanda's beautiful eyes could take a very sombre look, as was evident at this moment. She appeared to be struggling with some feeling of angry resentment; to judge, however, by the knitting of her white brow and the defiant curl of her lips, this feeling would not allow itself to be so easily mastered, but stood its ground firmly. Farther and farther the hunt receded, taking, as it seemed, the

direction towards the river, and leaving this part of the chase quiet and free. Gradually the varied, confused tones died away in the ever-increasing distance; only the dull shots reverberated through the air—then these too ceased, and all became still, still as death, in the forest.

Wanda must have stood so, motionless, for some length of time, when the sound of steps and a rustling close at hand attracted her attention. She raised herself impatiently, and was about to search for the cause of the disturbance, when the bushes were thrust aside, and Waldemar Nordeck stepped out from among them. He started at sight of the Countess. The unexpected meeting seemed as little agreeable to him as to her, but a retreat now was out of the question; they were too near each other for that. Waldemar bowed slightly, and said, "I was not aware that you had already left the hunt. Countess Morynska has the reputation of being so indefatigable a sportswoman—will she be missing at the close of the day?"

"I may retort with a like question," replied Wanda. "You, of all people, to be absent from the last run!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I have had quite enough of it. The noise and bustle of such a day destroy all the pleasure of the sport for me. To my mind all the excitement of the thing is in its chances, in the trouble one has to take. I miss all this, and, more especially, I miss the forest stillness and forest solitude."

Quiet and solitude were precisely what Wanda herself had felt in need of, what she had sought here; but nothing, of course,

would have induced her to admit it. She merely asked—

"You come now from the forester's house?"

"No, I sent on Norman there before me. The hunt is away down by the river. The run will soon be over now, and they are sure to pass by here on their return. The rendezvous is close by."

"And what are we to do in the mean time?" asked Wanda, impatiently.

"Wait," returned Waldemar, laconically, as he unslung his gun and uncocked it.

The young Countess frowned. "Wait!" In a matter of course tone as though he took her staying for granted! She had a great mind to return at once to the forester's house; but no! It was for him to withdraw after disturbing her so unceremoniously in her retreat. She resolved to remain, even though she must spend some time longer in this Nordeck's company.

He certainly made no sign of going. He had leaned his gun against a tree, and now stood with folded arms surveying the landscape. Not once to-day had the sun succeeded in breaking through the veil of clouds; but now, at its setting, it gilded them with a bright gleam. A yellow flame spread over the western horizon, glimmering pale and uncertain through the trees, and the mists, those first precursors of evening, began to rise from the meadow ground. Very autumnal did the forest look with its half-stripped branches and carpet of dry leaves spread on the ground. Not a trace was there of that fresh sweet life which breathes through the woods in spring and summer, of that mighty

vital force which pulses then through Nature's veins; everywhere existence seemed on the ebb, everywhere marks were visible of slow but unceasing decay.

The young Countess's eyes were fixed, darkly meditative, on her companion's face, as though she must and would decipher some enigma there. He seemed aware of her observation, though turning from her as he stood, for he suddenly faced round, and said carelessly, in the tone of a common remark—

"There is something desolate in the look of such an autumn landscape as evening comes on."

"And yet it has a peculiar poetic melancholy of its own," said she. "Do not you think so?"

"I?" he asked, sharply. "I have had very little to do with poetry—as you know, Countess Morynska."

"Yes, I know," she answered, in the same tone; "but there are moments when it forces itself upon one."

"It may be so with romantic natures. People of my sort have to learn to push through life without either romance or poetry. The years must be endured and lived through one way or another."

"How calmly you say that! Mere patient endurance was not exactly your forte formerly. I think you are wonderfully changed in that respect."

"Oh, one does not always remain a passionate, hot-headed boy! But perhaps you think I can never get the better of my old childish follies."

Wanda bit her lips. He had shown her very plainly that he

could get the better of them. "I do not doubt it," she said, coldly. "I give you credit for much that you do not see fit to show openly."

Waldemar became attentive. For one moment he looked keenly, scrutinisingly at the young lady, and then replied quietly—

"In that case you set yourself in opposition to all Wilicza. People here are unanimous in declaring me a most inoffensive person."

"Because you wish to pass for such. I do not believe it."

"You are very good to ascribe a most unmerited importance to me," said Waldemar, ironically; "but it is cruel of you to deprive me of the single advantage I possess in the eyes of my mother and brother, that of being harmless and insignificant."

"If my aunt could hear the tone in which you say that, she would alter her opinion," declared Wanda, irritated by his sarcasm. "For the present, I am certainly alone in mine."

"And so you will continue," said Nordeck. "The world sees in me an indefatigable sportsman; perhaps, after the trial of day, it may vouch me a skilful rider—nothing more."

"Are you really bent on sport, Herr Nordeck, all these long days while you are roaming about with your gun and game bag?" asked the young lady, fixing a keen look on him.

"And on what else might I be bent, according to your notion?"

"I do not know, but I fancy you are inspecting your Wilicza, inspecting it closely. There is not a forester's station, not a village, not a farm, however distant from your property, which you have

not visited. You have even called at the farms leased out to the different tenants, and you will no doubt soon be as much at home everywhere else as you already are in your mother's drawing-room. You appear there but seldom, it is true, and play the part of an indifferent bystander; yet nothing of what is going on, no word or look, escapes you. You seem to bestow but little notice on our visitors; yet there is not one of them who has not had to pass muster before you and on whom you have not pronounced your verdict."

She had gone on delivering thrust after thrust with a sureness of aim and decision of manner well calculated to disconcert him, and, for a moment, he actually was unable to answer her. He stood with a darkened face and lips tightly pressed together, visibly striving to overcome his annoyance. It was, however, no easy thing to vanquish 'this Nordeck.' When he looked up the cloud was still on his brow, but his voice expressed nothing save the keenest sarcasm.

"You really make me feel ashamed, Countess. You show me that from the very day of my arrival I have been the object of your close and exclusive observation. That is indeed more than I deserve!"

Wanda started, and flashed a look, scorching in its anger, at the man who ventured to return her shaft.

"I certainly do not deny the observation," said she; "but you will feel perfectly assured, Herr Nordeck, that no personal interest has any share in it."

He smiled with unfeigned bitterness. "You are quite right. I do not suppose that *you* take any interest in my person. You are safe from any such suspicion on my part."

Wanda would not understand the allusion, but she avoided meeting his glance. "You will, at least, bear me witness that I have been candid," she continued. "It is for you now to admit or to deny the truth of that which I have observed."

"And if I decline to answer you?"

"I shall infer that I have seen aright, and shall earnestly endeavour to convince my aunt of the fact that her son is a more dangerous person than she supposes."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.