

E.WERNER

UNDER A

CHARM. VOL. I

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E. Werner

Under a Charm: A Novel. Vol. I

PART THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

The hot summer day was drawing to its close. The sun had already set; but the rosy flush of evening still lingered on the horizon, casting a radiant glow over the sea, which lay calm, scarce moved by a ripple, reflecting the last splendour of the departing day.

Close to the shore on the outskirts of C–, the fashionable watering-place, but at some little distance from the promenade, which at this hour was thronged by a brilliant, many-coloured crowd of visitors, stood a plain country house. Unpretending in appearance, compared with the other, for the most part, far larger and grander houses and villas of the place, it was remarkable for nothing save only for the beauty of its situation, its windows commanding a limitless view over the sea. Otherwise it stood there secluded, almost solitary, and could certainly only be preferred by such guests as wished rather to avoid, than to court, the noisy, busy life of C– during the bathing season.

At the open glass-door, which led out on to the balcony, stood a lady dressed in deep mourning. She was tall and imposing of stature, and might still pass for beautiful, although she had more than reached life's meridian. That face, with its clear regular lines, had, it is true, never possessed the charms of grace and loveliness; but, for that very reason, years had taken nothing from the cold severe beauty it still triumphantly retained. The black attire, the crape veil shading her brow, seemed to point to some heavy, and probably recent, loss; but one looked in vain for the trace of past tears in those eyes, for a touch of softness in those features so indicative of energy. If sorrow had really drawn nigh this woman, she had either not felt it very deeply, or had already overcome its pangs.

At her side stood a gentleman, like herself, of distinguished and noble carriage. He might, in reality, be only a few years older than his fair neighbour; but he looked as though more than a decade lay between them, for time had not passed by him with so light a hand. His grave face, very full of character, with its sharp, deeply marked features, had plainly weathered many a storm in life's journey; his thick dark hair was here and there streaked with grey; line upon line furrowed his brow, and there was a sombre melancholy in his eyes which communicated itself to the man's whole countenance.

"Still nothing to be seen! They will hardly return before sunset."

"You should have sent us word of your arrival," said the lady. "We only expected you in a few days. Besides, the boat does not come in sight until it has rounded that wooded promontory yonder, and then in a very few minutes it is here."

She stepped back into the room, and turned to a servant who was in the act of carrying some travelling wraps into one of the adjoining rooms.

"Go down to the shore, Pawlick," said she, "and directly the boat comes to land, tell my son and my niece that Count Morynski has arrived."

The servant withdrew in compliance with the order received. Count Morynski left his post on the balcony, and came into the room, seating himself by the lady's side.

"Forgive my impatience," he said. "The meeting with my sister ought to suffice me for the present; but it is a whole year since I last saw my child."

The lady smiled. "You will not see much more of the 'child.' A year makes a great change at her age, and Wanda gives promise of beauty."

"And her mental development? In your letters you have ever expressed yourself satisfied on that head."

"Certainly; she always outstrips her tasks. I have rather to restrain than to stimulate her ardour. In that respect I have nothing to wish for; but there is one point on which much is to be desired. Wanda has a strong, a most decided will of her own, and she is disposed to assert it passionately. I have sometimes been obliged to enforce the obedience she was greatly inclined to refuse me."

A fleeting smile brightened the father's face, as he replied, "A singular reproach from your lips! To have a will and to assert it under all circumstances is a prominent trait of your character—a family trait with us, indeed, I may say."

"Which, however, is not to be tolerated in a girl of sixteen, for there it only shows itself as defiance and caprice," his sister interrupted him. "I tell you beforehand, you yourself will have frequent occasion to combat it."

It seemed as though the turn taken by the conversation were not specially agreeable to the Count.

"I know that I could not give my child into better hands than yours," he said, evading the subject; "and for that reason I am doubly glad that, though I am about to claim Wanda for myself, she will not have to do without you altogether. I did not think you would make up your mind to return so soon after your husband's death. I expected you would stay in Paris, at all events until Leo had completed his studies."

The lady shook her head. "I never felt at home in Paris, in spite of the years we spent there. The emigrant's fate is no enviable one—you know it by experience. Prince Baratowski, indeed, could not again set foot in his own country; but no one can prevent his widow and son from returning, so I resolved to come without delay. Leo must be allowed to breathe his native air once more, so that he may feel himself truly a son of the soil. On him now rest all the hopes of our race. He is still very young, no doubt; but he must learn to outrun his years, and to make himself acquainted with those duties and tasks which have now devolved on him through his father's death."

"And where do you think of taking up your abode?" asked Count Morynski. "You know that my house is at all times ..."

"I know it," the Princess interrupted him; "but no, thanks. For me the all-important point now is to assure Leo's future, and to give him the means of maintaining his name and position before the world. This has been hard enough for us of late, and now it has become a perfect impossibility. You know our circumstances, and are aware what sacrifices our banishment has imposed on us. Something must be done. For my son's sake I have decided upon a step which, for myself alone, I never would have taken. Do you guess why I chose C—for our place of sojourn this summer?"

"No; but I was surprised at it. Witold's estate lies within five or six miles of this, and I thought you would rather have avoided the neighbourhood. But perhaps you are in communication with Waldemar again?"

"No," said the Princess, coldly. "I have not seen him since we left for France, and since then have hardly had a line from him. During all these years he has had no thought for his mother."

"Nor his mother for him," observed the Count, parenthetically.

"Was I to expose myself to a rebuff, to a humiliation?" asked the Princess with some warmth. "This Witold has always been hostile to me; he has exercised his unlimited authority as guardian in the most offensive manner, setting me completely at nought. I am powerless as opposed to him."

"He would hardly have ventured to cut off all intercourse between you and Waldemar. A mother's rights are too sacred to be thus put aside, had you but insisted on them with your usual resolution. That, however, was never the case, to my knowledge, for—be candid, Hedwiga—you never had any love for your eldest son."

Hedwiga made no reply to this reproach. She rested her head on her hand in silence.

"I can understand that he does not take the first place in your heart," went on the Count. "He is the son of a husband whom you did not love, who was forced upon you—the living reminder of a

marriage you cannot yet think of without bitterness. Leo is the child of your heart, of your affections ..."

"His father never gave me cause for a word of complaint," the Princess added, emphatically.

The Count shrugged his shoulders slightly. "You ruled Baratowski completely; but that is not the question now. You have a plan; do you intend to renew former, half-forgotten relations with Witold and his ward?"

"I intend, at last, to assert those rights of which I was robbed by Nordeck's will—that unjust will, every line of which was dictated by hatred of me, which deprived alike the widow and the mother of her due. Hitherto it has remained in full force; but its provisions fixed Waldemar's majority at the age of one and twenty. He attained that age on his last birthday, and he is now his own master. I wish to see whether he will suffer things to go so far that his mother must seek an asylum with her relations, while he reckons among the richest landowners of the country, and it would cost him but a word to assure me and his brother a suitable position and means of existence on one of the estates."

Morynski shook his head doubtfully.

"You count upon finding natural filial affection in this son of yours. I am afraid you are deceiving yourself. He has been severed from you since his earliest childhood, and love for his mother will hardly have been inculcated on him as a duty. I never saw him but as a child, when, I own, he made the most unfavourable impression upon me. One thing I know for certain, he was the reverse of tractable."

"I know it too," returned the Princess with equanimity. "He is his father's son, and, like him, rough, unmanageable, and incapable of all higher culture. Even as a boy he resembled him, trait for trait; and, with such a guardian as Witold, education will have given the finishing touches to Nature's work. I do not deceive myself as to Waldemar's character; but, nevertheless, there will be a way of leading him. Minds of an inferior order always yield in the end to intellectual superiority. Everything depends upon making it properly felt."

"Were you able to lead his father?" asked her brother, gravely.

"You forget, Bronislaus, that I was then but a girl of seventeen, without experience, altogether unversed in the ways of the world. I should now be able to compass even such a character as his, and should certainly gain an ascendancy over him. Besides this, with Waldemar, I shall have on my side the weight of my authority as his mother. He will bend to it."

The Count looked very incredulous at these words, spoken in a tone of great decision. He had no time to reply, for a light, rapid step was now heard in the anteroom. The door was flung open with impetuous haste, and a young girl, rushing in, threw herself into the arms of Morynski, who sprang up and clasped his daughter to his breast with passionate tenderness.

The Princess had risen also. She did not seem quite to approve of so stormy a greeting on the part of the young lady; she said nothing, however, but turned to her son, who came in at that moment.

"You stayed out a long time, Leo. We have been expecting you for the last hour."

"Forgive us, mamma. The sunset on the sea was so beautiful, we could not bear to lose a minute of it."

With these words, Leo Baratowski went up to his mother. He was, indeed, very young, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years of age. One look in his face was sufficient to show that his features were modelled on those of the Princess. The resemblance was striking, as it only can be between mother and son; and yet the latter's fine youthful head, with its dark, curly hair, bore quite another stamp from hers. The cold, severe expression was wanting. Here all was fire and life; all the passion of a glowing, and as yet unbridled, temperament blazed in the dark eyes, and his whole appearance was such an impersonation of adolescent strength and beauty, it was not difficult to understand the pride with which the Princess took her son's hand to lead him to his uncle.

"Leo has no father now," she said, gravely. "I shall look to you for help, Bronislaus, when the counsel and guidance of a man become necessary to him in his career."

The Count embraced his nephew with heartfelt warmth, but in a far quieter fashion than that in which he had received his daughter. The sight of her seemed for the present to drive all else into the background. His looks continually wandered back to the young girl, who, in this last year during which he had been separated from her, had almost grown to maiden's estate.

Wanda was not in the least like her father. If the likeness between Leo and his mother were striking in the extreme, here, between father and daughter, such resemblance was altogether wanting. The young Countess Morynska was, indeed, like no one but herself. Her slender, graceful figure was as yet unformed, and she had evidently not attained to her full height. The face, too, was childlike, though her features already justified the Princess's claim on their behalf. A rather pale face it was, the cheeks being tinged only by faintest pink; but there was nothing sickly in this paleness, and it in no way diminished the impression of fresh and healthful vigour. Her luxuriant, raven-black hair set the whiteness of her complexion in still stronger relief, and dark dewy eyes were hid beneath the long black lashes. Wanda did indeed give promise of beauty. As yet she had it not; but, on the other hand, she possessed that peculiar charm which belongs to many a girlish figure, standing on the boundary line between child and maiden hood. There was about her a pretty blending of the child's petulance and artlessness with the graver demeanour of the young lady, who, at every turn, calls to mind her sixteen years; while the bloom of early youth, of the blossom budding forth, invested her whole person with a special grace of its own, and made her doubly charming.

When the first emotion of the meeting was over, the conversation flowed in calmer channels. Count Morynski had drawn his daughter down on to a seat near him, and was jestingly reproaching her for her late return.

"I knew nothing of your arrival, papa," Wanda said in self-defence; "and, besides, I had an adventure in the forest."

"In the forest?" interrupted her aunt. "Were you not on the water, with Leo?"

"Only coming back, aunt. We intended to sail back to the Beech Holm, as had been agreed; but Leo declared, and persisted in it, that the way by sea was far nearer than by the footpath through the wood. I maintained the contrary. We argued about it for some time, and at last decided upon each proving we were right. Leo sailed alone, and I set off through the forest."

"And reached the Beech Holm quite safely a good half-hour after me," said Leo, triumphantly.

"I had lost my way," asserted the young lady, warmly; "and I should very likely be in the forest still if I had not been put right."

"And who put you right?" asked the Count.

Wanda laughed mischievously. "A wood-demon, one of the old giants who are said to wander about here at times. But don't ask me any more now, papa. Leo is burning with curiosity to know all about it. He has been teasing me with questions the whole way back, and therefore he shall not hear a syllable."

"It is all an invention," cried Leo, laughing, "a pretext to explain your late arrival. You would rather make up a long story than acknowledge I was right for once."

Wanda was about to retort in the same tone, when the Princess interfered.

"Pretext or not," said she, sharply, "this solitary walk, taken without consulting any one, was to the last degree improper. I had given you permission to go for a short sail in Leo's company, and I cannot understand how he could leave you in the woods for hours, by yourself."

"But Wanda would go," said Leo, by way of excuse. "She wanted to have our dispute about the distance settled."

"Yes, dear aunt, I *would* go" (the young lady laid greater stress on the word than she would have ventured to do, had her father not been protectingly at hand), "and Leo knew very well it was useless to try and hold me back."

Here was a fresh instance of the girl's wilfulness, requiring to be severely dealt with.

The Princess was about to deliver a serious reprimand, when her brother quickly interposed.

"You will allow me to take Wanda with me?" said he. "I feel rather tired from the journey, and should like to go to my room. Good-bye for the present." With this he rose, took his daughter's arm, and left the room with her.

"My uncle seems in raptures at the sight of Wanda," remarked Leo, as the two disappeared.

The Princess looked after them in silence. "He will overlook it," she said at last, under her breath; "he will worship her with blind adoration, such as he lavished formerly on her mother, and Wanda will soon know her power and learn to use it. This was what I feared from a return to her father. The very first hour shows that I was right. What is this story about an adventure in the forest, Leo?"

Leo shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Probably one of Wanda's teasing jokes. She made me curious at first with all sorts of hints, and then obstinately refused to tell me more, taking great delight in my vexation. You know her way."

"Yes, I know her way." There was a slight frown on the Princess's brow. "Wanda likes to play with every one and everything, to let all who come near her feel her arbitrary humour. You should not make it so easy to her, Leo, at least so far as you yourself are concerned."

The young Prince crimsoned to the temples. "I, mamma? Why, I am always quarrelling with Wanda!"

"And always submitting in the end to be led by her caprices. Do not tell me, my son—I know who invariably triumphs when a contest arises between you two; but, for the present, this is all childishness. I wanted to speak to you of something serious. Shut the balcony door, and come here to me."

Leo obeyed. His face showed that he was offended, less, perhaps, by the reproof administered to him, than by the expression 'childishness.'

The Princess, however, took not the slightest notice of his mood.

"You know," she began, "that I had been married before I bestowed my hand on your father, and that a son of that first marriage still lives. You know, too, that he has been reared and educated in Germany; but up to this time you have never seen him. A meeting between you will now take place. You are to make his acquaintance."

Leo sprang up, his eyes sparkling with eagerness and liveliest surprise.

"My brother Waldemar?"

"Waldemar Nordeck, yes." The emphasis laid on the latter name conveyed a perhaps unintentional, but most decided, protest against this relationship between a Nordeck and a Baratowski. "He lives in this neighbourhood on his guardian's estate. I have sent him word of our presence here, and I expect he will come over one of these days."

Leo's previous ill-humour had vanished. The subject was evidently one of the greatest interest to him. "Mamma," said he, hesitatingly, "may I not hear something more of these sad family affairs? All I know is that your marriage was an unhappy one, that you are at variance with Waldemar's relations, and with his guardian. Even this I have only learned from my uncle's allusions, and from hints dropped by old servants of our house. I have never ventured to ask a question, either of you or of my father. I saw that it would hurt him, and make you angry. You both seemed anxious to banish the remembrance from your mind."

A singularly hard expression came over the Princess's features, and the tone of her voice was hard too, as she replied, "Certainly, old mortifications and humiliations are best hidden from view and forgotten, and that unhappy union was fertile in both. Do not ask me about it now, Leo. You know the events that happened. Let that suffice you. I neither can nor will take you, step by step, through a family drama, of which I cannot think even now without a feeling of hatred for the dead rising up within me. I thought to efface those three years altogether from my life, and little dreamed that I should one day be compelled myself to call up the memory of them."

"And what compels you?" asked Leo, quickly. "Not our return? We are going to my uncle's, at Rakowicz, are we not?"

"No, my son, we are going to Wilicza."

"To Wilicza!" repeated Leo, in surprise. "Why, that is ... that is Waldemar's place!"

"It would have been my dower-house, but for the will which ejected me," said the Princess, in a cutting tone; "now it is the property of my son. Room will certainly be found there for his mother."

Leo started back with an impetuous gesture. "What does it mean?" he asked, hotly. "Are you going to lower yourself before this Waldemar, to ask a favour of him? I know that we are poor; but I would bear anything, do without anything, rather than consent that, for my sake, you ..."

The Princess rose suddenly. Her look and attitude were so commanding that the boy stopped short in the midst of his passionate protest.

"Do you suppose that your mother is capable of lowering herself? Have you so little knowledge of her? Leave to me the care of upholding my dignity—and yours. It really is not needful that you should point out to me the limits to which I may go. It is for me alone to judge of them."

Leo was silent, and looked down. His mother went up to him, and took his hand.

"Will this hot head of yours never learn to reason quietly?" said she, more gently. "Yet calm reflection will be so necessary to it in life? My plans with regard to Waldemar I shall carry out myself, alone. If there be bitterness attaching to them, you, my Leo, shall feel nothing of it. You must keep your sight unclouded, your spirit fresh and valiant for the future which is in store for you. That is your task. Mine is to assure you that future at any cost. Trust your mother."

With a dumb prayer for forgiveness, her son raised her hand to his lips. She drew him to her; and, as she bent down to kiss the handsome, animated face, it became manifest that this cold, austere woman had a mother's heart, and that, in spite of the severity with which she treated him, Leo was that heart's idol.

CHAPTER II

"Do oblige me by leaving off those everlasting lamentations of yours, Doctor. I tell you, there is no changing the boy. I have tried often enough, and I have had six tutors, one after the other, to help me. We could none of us do anything with him; you can't do anything either, so just let him go his own way."

This speech, delivered in the most vigorous tones, was addressed by Herr Witold, Squire of Altenhof, to the gentleman intrusted with his ward's education. The room in which the two were seated was situated at the end of the house of which it formed a corner. Its windows were thrown open on account of the heat, and its whole appearance seemed to indicate that the dwellers therein held such things as elegance and comfort to be quite superfluous, if not absolutely harmful, indulgences. The plain and, for the most part, antiquated furniture was scattered here and there, without the least regard for tasteful, or even for commodious, arrangement—pushed right and left to serve the convenience of the moment. On the walls hung guns, sporting tackle, and antlers in indiscriminate confusion. Wherever room for a nail had been found, there that nail had been driven in, and the article on hand at the time hung thereon, without the smallest consideration for the figure it made in the place allotted to it. The bureau was loaded with piles of house and farm accounts, together with tobacco pipes, spurs, and half a dozen riding-whips. The newspaper lay on the carpet; for carpet there was, in name at least, though its absence would have proved a better ornament to the room, since it bore but too evident traces of serving the great setter as his daily couch. Not a thing was in the place to which it rightly belonged; but rather there where it had last been made use of, and where it remained ready for any future occasion. One single object in the room testified, and that in a truly appalling manner, to the owner's artistic tastes, namely, a brilliant hunting-piece of most intense and vivid colouring, which hung in the place of honour over the sofa.

The Squire sat in his armchair by the window, lost in the dense clouds of smoke which issued from his meerschaum. A man of about sixty years, he looked relatively young, in spite of his white hair, and was evidently in the full enjoyment of health and strength. He was of an important presence, his height and bulk being alike considerable. There was, perhaps, not overmuch intelligence in the ruddy face; but, on the other hand, it wore an unmistakable air of good humour. His dress, made up partly of indoor raiment and partly of hunting gear, was decidedly negligent; and his whole massive person, with its powerful, deep-toned voice, formed the strongest contrast to the lank figure of the tutor, now standing before him.

The Doctor might be thirty or thereabouts. He was of middle height, but his stooping attitude made him appear short of stature. His face was not exactly unhandsome, but it wore too evident a look of sickliness, and of the depression bred of a painful position in life, to prove attractive. His complexion was pale and unhealthy, his brow deeply lined, and his eyes had that abstracted, uncertain expression peculiar to those who seldom, if ever, bring their thoughts altogether to bear on the realities around them. His black attire was ordered with scrupulous care; and there was an air of anxious timidity about the man's whole being, betraying itself in his voice, as he replied in a low tone—

"You know, Herr Witold, that I never apply to you, save in an extreme case. This time I must call upon you to use your authority. I am at my wits' end."

"What has Waldemar been doing now?" asked the master of the house, impatiently. "I know he is unmanageable as well as you do, but I can't help you in the matter. The boy got far beyond my control long ago. He will obey no one now, not even me. He runs away from your books, and prefers to be off with his gun, does he? Tut! I was no better at his age. They could never ram all their learned stuff into my head. He has no manners, has not he? Well, he does not want them. We live here among ourselves, and when we do have a neighbourly meeting now and again, we don't make

much ceremony about it. You know that well enough, Doctor. You always take to your heels, and escape from our shooting parties and drinking bouts."

"But, only think," objected the tutor, "if Waldemar with his rough wild ways were, later in life, to be thrown into another sphere; if he were to marry ..."

"Marry!" exclaimed Witold, absolutely hurt by such a supposition. "He will never do such a thing. What should he marry for? I have remained a bachelor all my life, and find myself uncommonly comfortable; and poor Nordeck would have done better to keep single. No, thank God, there is no fear of our Waldemar! Why, he runs off at the sight of a petticoat, and he is right."

So saying, Waldemar's guardian leaned back in his chair with an air of much contentment. The Doctor drew a step nearer.

"But to return to the point from which we set out," said he, hesitatingly. "You yourself admit that my pupil will no longer be guided by me. It must therefore be high time to send him to the University."

Herr Witold sprang up from his seat so suddenly that the tutor beat a hasty retreat.

"Did not I think something of the sort was coming! I have, heard nothing else from you for the last month. What should Waldemar go to the University for? To have his head stuffed with learning by the professors? I should think you have taken good care to do that for him by this time. All that an honest country gentleman needs to know, he knows. He is as great an authority about the land and the farm business as my inspector. He keeps the people in their place far more effectually than I can, and there is not a better man in the saddle or in the field. He is a splendid young fellow!"

The tutor did not appear to share this enthusiastic view of his pupil's merits. He hardly ventured to express so much in words, but summoned up all his evidently slender stock of courage for the timid reply.

"But, sir, the heir of Wilicza requires, after all, something more than the qualifications which go to make a good inspector or land-steward. Some higher culture, some academical study, appear to me extremely desirable."

"They don't appear desirable to me at all," retorted Herr Witold. "Isn't it enough that, by-and-by, I shall have to let the boy, who is the very apple of my eye, go from me, just because his property lies in that cursed land of Polacks? Must I part from him now to send him to the University against his will? I'll do nothing of the sort, I tell you, nothing of the sort. He shall stay here until he goes to Wilicza."

With this, he puffed so savagely at his pipe that for several minutes his face disappeared behind the clouds of smoke. The tutor sighed, and was silent. His quiet resignation touched the tyrannical Squire.

"Don't trouble your mind any more about the University, Doctor," said he, in quite a changed tone; "you will never persuade Waldemar to consent to the plan as long as you live. And for yourself, too, it is better that you should stay at Altenhof. Here you are just in the midst of your tumuli and your Runic stones, or whatever you call the rubbish you are after all day long. I can't understand, for my own part, what you can see so remarkable in the old heathen lumber; but the heart of man must take delight in something, and I am right glad you can find any pleasure to satisfy you, for you have often a hard time of it with Waldemar—and with me into the bargain."

The Doctor, much confused, made a deprecatory gesture. "Oh, Herr Witold!"

"Don't put yourself out," said the other, good-naturedly. "I know that in your secret soul you look upon our life here as a godless business, and that you would have run away from us long ago, if it had not been for the heathen rubbish you have grown so fond of, and which you can't bring yourself to part from. Well, I am not such a bad fellow after all, you know, though I do fly out in a passion occasionally; and as you are always pottering about among the pagans, you must be just in your element here with us. I have heard say that people in those days had no manners at all. They used to fight and murder each other out of pure friendship."

The historical information displayed by Herr Witold appeared to the Doctor to have a dangerous tendency. Possibly he feared some practical illustration of it on his own person, for he backed by almost imperceptible degrees behind the sofa.

"Excuse me, the old Teutons ..."

"Were not cut out after your pattern, Doctor," cried the Squire with a shout of laughter, for the manœuvre had not escaped him. "I know that much, at all events. I think, of us all, Waldemar comes the nearest to them, so I can't make out what fault you can find with him."

"But, Herr Witold, in the nineteenth century ..." The Doctor got no further in his dissertation, for at that moment the crack of a shot was heard—of a shot fired close to the open window. A bullet whistled through the room, and the great stag's antlers, which hung over the bureau, fell down with a crash.

The Squire jumped up from his seat. "Waldemar! What does this mean? Is the boy taking to shoot into the very rooms? Wait a moment; I'll put a stop to that work!"

He would have hurried out, but was stopped at the entrance by a young man, who pushed, or rather flung, open the door, letting it fall to on its hinges again with a bang. He wore a shooting suit, and carried in his hand the gun which had caused the late report, while at his side stalked a great pointer. Without any sort of greeting, or of excuse for this violent mode of making his appearance, he went up to Witold, placed himself right before him, and asked triumphantly—

"Now, which of us was right, you or I?"

The Squire was really angry. "Is that the way to behave, shooting over people's heads?" he cried, testily. "One is not sure of one's life with you now. Do you want to put the Doctor and me out of the world?"

Waldemar shrugged his shoulders. "Where was the harm? I wanted to win my wager. You declared yesterday I should not hit that nail, where the twelve-year-old hung, from outside. There's my ball, up there."

He pointed to the wall. Witold followed the direction.

"It really is!" said he, full of admiration, and altogether appeased. "Doctor, just look—but what is the matter with you?"

"Doctor Fabian has got another of his nervous attacks, no doubt," said Waldemar ironically, laying aside his gun, but making no attempt to succour his teacher, who had sunk back on the sofa, half fainting with the fright, and was still trembling from head to foot. The good-natured Witold raised him up, and encouraged him to the best of his ability.

"Come, come, who would think of fainting because a little powder went off! Why, it is not worth speaking of. We had laid the wager, that is quite true; but how was I to know the young madcap would set to work in such a senseless fashion? Instead of calling us out, that we might look on quietly, he makes no more ado, but takes his aim straight over our heads. Are you better now? Ah, that's right, thank God!"

Doctor Fabian had risen, and was striving to master his emotion; but as yet he could not quite succeed.

"You might have shot us, Waldemar," said he, with pale and trembling lips.

"No, Doctor, I might not," answered Waldemar, in a tone the reverse of reverential. "You and my uncle were standing to the right, and I aimed over there to the left, at least five paces off. You know I never miss."

"No matter, you will let it alone in future," declared Witold, with an attempt at asserting his authority as guardian. "The deuce himself may be playing tricks with the balls, and then there will be an accident. Once for all, I forbid you to shoot anywhere near the house."

The young man crossed his arms defiantly. "You can forbid me, uncle, as much as you like, but I shan't obey. I shall shoot if I choose."

He stood confronting his guardian, the very incarnation of rebellious wilfulness. Waldemar Nordeck's whole appearance was of the true Germanic type; no single feature of his bore evidence to the fact that his mother had come of another race. His tall, almost gigantic, figure towered several inches above even Witold's portly form; but his frame lacked symmetry, every line in it was sharp and angular. His light hair seemed in its overabundance to be quite a troublesome load on his head, for it fell low down over his brow, whence it was tossed back every now and then with an impatient gesture. His blue eyes had a sombre and, in moments of excitement like the present, almost a fierce expression. His face was decidedly plain. Here, too, the lines were sharp and unformed; all the boy's softer contours had vanished, and were not as yet replaced by the set features of the man. In the case of this young man, the transition stage was so marked as to be almost repulsive; and the uncouthness of his manners, his complete disdain of all polite forms, did not tend to diminish the unfavourable impression created by his appearance.

Herr Witold was evidently one of those men whose person and bearing seem to argue an energy of which, in reality, they possess not a particle. Instead of meeting his ward's defiant rudeness with steady resolution, the guardian thought proper to give way.

"I told you so, Doctor; the boy won't mind me any longer," said he, with an equanimity which showed that this was the usual outcome of such differences, and that, whenever it should please the young gentleman to be in earnest, the uncle would be found powerless as the tutor.

Waldemar took no further notice of either of them. He threw himself at full length on the sofa, without the least regard to the fact that his boots, completely soaked by a journey through the marshes, were coming in contact with the cushions; while the pointer, who had also been in the water, followed his master's example, and, with equal recklessness, settled himself down comfortably on the carpet.

A rather awkward pause ensued. The Squire, grumbling to himself, tried to light his pipe, which had gone out in the interval. Dr. Fabian had taken refuge by the window, and, gazing out, cast a look towards heaven which said more plainly than any words that, truly, he did consider the way of life here to be 'a godless sort of business.'

The Squire had meanwhile been hunting for his tobacco pouch, which was at last happily discovered on the bureau, under the spurs and riding-whips. As he drew it out, an unopened envelope fell close by his hand. He took it up.

"I had nearly forgotten that. Waldemar, there is a letter for you."

"For me?" asked Waldemar, indifferently, and yet with that touch of surprise called up by an event of rare occurrence.

"Yes. There's a coronet on the seal, and a coat of arms with all sorts of heraldic beasts. From the Princess Baratowska, I presume. It is a long time since we have been honoured with her Highness's gracious autograph."

Young Nordeck broke open the letter, and glanced through it. It seemed to contain but a few lines; nevertheless, a heavy cloud gathered on the reader's brow.

"Well, what is it?" asked Witold. "Are the conspirators still hatching their plots in Paris? I did not look at the postmark."

"The Princess and her son are out yonder at C—," reported Waldemar. He seemed purposely to avoid the names of mother and brother. "She wishes to see me. I shall ride over to-morrow morning."

"You will do nothing of the kind," said the Squire. "Your princely relatives have not troubled themselves about you for years, and they need not begin now. We want nothing of them. Stay where you are."

"Uncle, I have had enough of being ordered about and forbidden to do this and that!" Waldemar broke out, with such sudden vehemence that the Squire stared at him open-mouthed. "Am I a schoolboy that I need ask your leave at every step? Have not I the right, at one and twenty, to decide whether I will see my mother or not? I *have* decided, and to-morrow morning I shall ride over to C—."

"Well, don't put yourself in a passion, and be so bearish," said Witold, more astonished than angry at this outburst of fury, which was quite inexplicable to him. "Go where you like, so far as I am concerned; but I'll have nothing to do with the Polish lot—that I tell you."

Waldemar wrapped himself in sullen silence. He took his gun, whistled to his dog, and left the room. His guardian looked after him, and shook his head. All at once a thought seemed to strike him. He took up the letter, which Waldemar had carelessly left lying on the table, and read it through. Now it was Herr Witold's turn to knit his brow and frown more and more ominously, until at last the storm broke.

"I thought so!" he cried, thumping with his fist on the table. "It is just like my fine madam. In six lines she stirs the boy up to rebel against me. That is the reason he turned so cantankerous all in a minute. Listen to this delightful letter, Doctor: 'My son,—Years have passed, during which you have given no sign of life.'—As if she had given us any!—'I only know through strangers that you are living at Altenhof with your guardian. I am staying at C— just now, and should rejoice to see you here, and to have an opportunity of introducing your brother to you. I know not, indeed,'—listen, Doctor, this is where she pricks him,—'I know not, indeed, whether you will be free to pay me this visit. I hear that, notwithstanding you have attained your majority, you are still quite subject to your guardian's will.'—Doctor, you are witness of how the boy tramples on us both day after day!—'Of your readiness to come I make no doubt; but I do not feel so sure that Herr Witold will grant his permission. I have therefore preferred to address myself directly to you, that I may see whether you possess sufficient strength of character to comply with this, the first wish your mother has ever expressed to you, or whether you *dare* not accede even to this request of hers.'—The '*dare*' is underlined. —'If I am right in the former supposition, I shall expect to see you shortly. Your brother joins me in love.—Your mother.'"

Herr Witold was so exasperated that he dashed the letter to the ground. "There's a thing for a man to read! Cleverly managed of the lady mother, that! She knows as well as I do what a pig-headed fellow Waldemar is, and if she had studied him for years she could not have hit on his weak side better. The mere thought of restraint being placed on him makes him mad. I may move heaven and earth now to keep him; he will go just to show me he can have his own way. What do you say to the business?"

Doctor Fabian seemed sufficiently initiated in the family affairs to look upon the approaching meeting with alarm equal to the Squire's, though proceeding from a far different cause.

"Dear me! dear me!" he said, anxiously. "If Waldemar goes over to C— and behaves in his usual rough, unmannerly fashion, if the Princess sees him so, what will she think of him?"

"Think he has taken after his father, and not after her," was the Squire's emphatic reply. "That is just how she ought to see Waldemar; then it will be made evident to her that he will be no docile instrument to serve her intrigues—for that there are intrigues on foot again, I'd wager my head. Either the princely purse is empty—I fancy it never was too full—or there is some neat little State conspiracy concocting again, and Wilicza lies handy for it, being so close to the frontier."

"But, Herr Witold," remonstrated the Doctor, "why try to widen the unhappy breach in the family, now that the mother gives proof of a conciliatory spirit? Would it not be better to make peace at last?"

"You don't understand, Doctor," said Witold, with a bitterness quite unusual to him. "There is no peace to be made with that woman, unless one surrenders one's own will, and consents to be ruled entirely by her; it was because poor Nordeck would not do so that she led him the life of hell at home. Now, I won't exonerate him altogether. He had some nasty faults, and could make things hard for a woman; but all the troubles came of his taking this Morynska for a wife. Another girl might have led him, might perhaps have changed some things in him; but, for such a task, a little heart would have been needed, and of that article Madam Hedwiga never had much to show. Well, the 'degradation,' as they call it, of her first marriage has been made good by the second. It was only a pity that the Princess Baratowska, with her son and spouse, could not take up her residence at Wilicza. She could never get

over that; but luckily the will drew the bolt there, and we have taken care to bring up Waldemar in such a way that he is not likely to undo its work by any act of folly."

"We!" exclaimed the Doctor, much shocked. "Herr Witold, I have given my lessons conscientiously, according to my instructions. I have unfortunately never been able to influence my pupil's mind and character, or ..." he hesitated.

"Or he would have been different from what he is," added Witold, laughing. "The youngster suits me as he is, in spite of his wild ways. If you like it better, *I* have brought him up. If the result does not fit in with the Baratowskis' plots and plans, I shall be right glad; and if my education and their Parisian breeding get fairly by the ears to-morrow, I shall be still better pleased. Then we shall be quits, at least, for that spiteful letter yonder."

With these words the Squire left the room. The Doctor stooped to pick up the letter, which still lay on the floor. He took it up, folded it carefully together, and said, with a profound sigh—

"And one day people will say, 'It was a Dr. Fabian who brought up the young heir.' Oh, just Heaven!"

CHAPTER III

The domain of Wilicza, to which Waldemar Nordeck was heir, was situated in one of the eastern provinces of the country, and consisted of a vast agglomeration of estates, whereof the central point was the old castle Wilicza, with the lands of the same name. To tell how the late Herr Nordeck obtained possession of this domain, and subsequently won for himself the hand of a Countess Morynska, would be to add a fresh chapter to that tale, so oft repeated in our days, of the fall of ancient families, once rich and influential, and the rise of a middle-class element which, with the wealth, acquires the power that was formerly claimed by the nobility as their exclusive privilege.

Count Morynski and his sister were early left orphans, and lived under the guardianship of their relations. Hedwiga was educated in a convent; on leaving it, she found that her hand was already disposed of. This was assuredly nothing unusual in the noble circles to which she belonged, and the young Countess would have acquiesced unconditionally, had her destined husband been of equal birth with herself—had he been one of her own people; but she had been chosen as the instrument to work out the family plans, which, at all costs, must be carried into execution.

Some few years ago, in the neighbourhood where lay the property of most of the Morynski family, a certain Nordeck had arisen—a German, of low birth, but who had attained to great wealth, and had settled in that part of the country. The condition of the province at that time made it easy for a foreign element to graft itself on the soil, whereas, under ordinary circumstances, every hindrance would have been opposed to it. The after-throes of the last rebellion, which, though it had actually broken out beyond the frontier, had awakened a fellow-feeling throughout the German provinces, made themselves everywhere felt. Half the nobility had fled, or were impoverished by the sacrifices they had been eager to make in the cause of their fatherland; it was, therefore, not difficult for Nordeck to buy up the debt-laden estates at a tithe of their value, and, by degrees, to obtain possession of a domain which insured him a position among the first landed proprietors of the country.

The intruder was, it is true, wanting in breeding, and of most unprepossessing appearance; moreover, it soon became evident that he had neither mind nor character to recommend him. Yet his immense property gave him a weight in the land which was but too speedily recognised, especially as, with determined hostility to all connected with the Polish faction, his influence was invariably thrown into the opposite scale. This may possibly have been his revenge for the fact that the exclusively aristocratic and Slavonic neighbourhood held him at a distance, and treated him with unconcealed, nay, very openly manifested contempt. Whether imprudencies had been committed on the side of the disaffected, or whether the cunning stranger had played the spy on his own account, suffice it to say that he gained an insight into certain party machinations. This made him a most formidable adversary. To secure his goodwill became a necessity of the situation.

The man must be won over at any cost, and it had long been known that such winning over was possible. As a millionaire, he was naturally inaccessible to bribery; his vulnerable point, therefore, was his vanity, which made him look on an alliance with one of the old noble Polish families with a favourable eye. Perhaps the circumstance that, half a century before, Wilicza had been in the possession of the Morynskis directed the choice to the granddaughter of the last proprietor; perhaps no other house was ready to offer up a daughter or a sister, to exact from them the obedience now demanded of the poor dependent orphan. It flattered the rough *parvenu* to think that the hand of a Countess Morynska was within his grasp. A dowry was no object to him, so he entered into the plan with great zest; and thus, at her first entrance into the world, Hedwiga found herself face to face with a destiny against which her whole being revolted.

Her first step was decidedly to refuse compliance; but what availed the 'no' of a girl of seventeen when opposed to a family resolve dictated by urgent necessity? Commands and threats proving of no effect, recourse was had to persuasion. The young relation was shown the brilliant *rôle* she would

have to play as mistress of Wilicza, the unlimited ascendancy she would assuredly exercise over a man to whose level she stooped so low. Much was said of the satisfaction a Morynska would feel on once more obtaining control over property torn from her ancestors; much, too, of the pressing need existing of converting the dreaded adversary into a ductile tool for the furtherance of their own plans. It was required of her that she should hold Wilicza, and the enormous revenues at the disposal of its master, in the interests of her party—and where compulsion had failed, argument succeeded. The *rôle* of a poor relation was by no means to the young Countess's taste. She was glowing with ambition. The heart's needs and affections were unknown to her; and when, at sight of her, Nordeck betrayed some fleeting spark of passion, she too believed that her dominion over him would be unbounded. So she yielded, and the marriage took place.

But the plans, the selfish calculations of both parties were alike to be brought to nought. His neighbours had been mistaken in their estimate of this man. Instead of bowing to his young wife's will, he now showed himself as lord and master, impervious to all influence, regardless of her superior rank; his passing fancy for his bride being soon transformed into hatred when he discovered that she only desired to make use of him and of his fortune to serve her own ends and those of her family. The birth of a son made no change in their relations to each other; if anything, the gulf between husband and wife seemed to be only widened by it. Nordeck's character was not one to inspire a woman with esteem; and this woman displayed the contempt she felt for him in a way that would have stung any man to fury. Fearful scenes ensued; after one of which the young mistress of Wilicza left the castle, and fled to her brother for protection.

Little Waldemar, then barely a year old, was left with his father. Nordeck, enraged at his wife's flight, imperiously demanded her return. Bronislaus did what he could to protect his sister; and the quarrel between him and his brother-in-law might have been productive of the worst consequences, had not death unexpectedly stepped in and loosed the bonds of this short-lived, but most unhappy, union. Nordeck, who was a keen and reckless sportsman, met with an accident while out hunting. His horse fell with its rider, and the latter sustained injuries to which he shortly after succumbed; but on his deathbed he had strength enough, both of mind and body, to dictate a will excluding his wife from all share alike in his fortune and in the education of his child. Her flight from his house gave him the right so to exclude her, and he used it unsparingly. Waldemar was entrusted to the guardianship of an old school friend and distant connection, and the latter was endowed with unbounded authority. The widow tried, indeed, to resist; but the new guardian proved his friendship to the dead man by carrying out the provisions of the will with utter disregard to her feelings, and rejected all her claims. Already owner of Altenhof, Witold had no intention of remaining at Wilicza, or of leaving his ward behind him there. He took the boy with him to his own home. Nordeck's latest instructions had been to the effect that his son was to be entirely removed from his mother's influence and family; and these instructions were so strictly observed that, during the years of his minority, the young heir only paid a few flying visits to his estates, always in the company of his guardian. All his youth was spent at Altenhof.

As for the enormous revenues of Wilicza, of which at present no use could be made, they were suffered to accumulate, and went to swell the capital; so that Waldemar Nordeck, on coming of age, found himself in possession of wealth such as but few indeed could boast.

The future lord of Wilicza's mother lived on at first in the house of her brother, who meanwhile had also married; but she did not long remain there. One of the Count's most intimate friends, Prince Baratowski, fell passionately in love with the young, clever, and beautiful widow, who, so soon as the year of her mourning was out, bestowed her hand upon him. This second marriage was in all respects a happy one. People said, indeed, that the Prince, though a gallant gentleman, was not of a very energetic temperament, and that he bowed submissively to his wife's sceptre. However this may have been, he loved both her and the son she bore him, tenderly and devotedly.

But the happiness of this union was not long to remain untroubled. This time, however, the storms came from without. Leo was still a child when that revolutionary epoch arrived which set half Europe in a blaze. The rebellion, so often quelled, broke out with renewed violence in the Polish provinces. Morynski and Baratowski were true sons of their fatherland. They threw themselves with ardent enthusiasm into the struggle from which they hoped the salvation of their country and the restoration of its greatness. The insurrection ended, as so many of its predecessors had ended, in hopeless defeat. It was forcibly suppressed, and on this occasion much severity was displayed towards the rebel districts. Prince Baratowski and his brother-in-law fled to Paris, whither their wives and children followed them. Countess Morynska, a delicate, fragile woman, did not long endure the sojourn in a foreign land. She died in the following year, and Bronislaus then gave his child into his sister's charge. He himself could no longer bear to stay in Paris, where everything reminded him of the wife he had loved so ardently, and lost. He lived a restless, wandering life, roving from place to place, returning every now and then to see his daughter. At last, an amnesty being proclaimed, he was free to go back to his native country, where, through the death of a relation, he had lately succeeded to the estate of Rakowicz. He now settled down on his new property. Matters stood far otherwise with Prince Baratowski, who was excluded from the amnesty. He had been one of the leaders of the rebellion, and had taken a prominent part in the movement. Return was not to be thought of for him, and his wife and son shared his exile, until his death removed all barriers, and they too became free to make their future home where they would.

CHAPTER IV

It was early in the forenoon, and the morning room of the villa in C—, occupied by the Baratowski family, was, for the time being, tenanted by the Princess alone. She was absorbed in the study of a letter which she had received an hour before, and which contained an announcement from Waldemar that he intended coming over that day, and should follow quickly on his messenger's steps. The mother gazed as fixedly at the missive as though from the short cold words, or from the handwriting, she were trying to discern the character of the son who had grown so complete a stranger to her. Since her second marriage she had seen him but at rare intervals; and during the latter years she had spent in France, communication between them had almost entirely ceased. The picture she still bore fresh in mind of the boy at the age of ten was unprepossessing enough, and the accounts she heard of the youth coincided but too well with it. Nevertheless, it was necessary, at any cost, to secure an influence over him; and the Princess, though she in no way attempted to disguise from herself the difficulties in her path, was not the woman to recoil from the task she had undertaken. She had risen and was pacing up and down the room, musing deeply, when a quick loud step was heard without. It halted in the anteroom. Next minute Pawlick opened the door, and announced "Herr Waldemar Nordeck." The visitor entered, the door closed behind him, and mother and son stood face to face.

Waldemar came forward a few steps, and then suddenly stopped. The Princess, in the act of going to meet him, paused in her turn. In the very moment of their meeting a bridgeless chasm seemed to yawn open between them; all the estrangement and enmity of former years rose up again mighty as ever. That pause, that silence of a second, spoke more plainly than words. It showed that the voice of natural affection was mute in the mother's heart, as in the son's. The Princess was the first to dissimulate that instinctive movement of reserve.

"I thank you for coming, my son," said she, and held out her hand to him.

Waldemar drew near slowly. He just touched the offered hand, and then let it drop. No attempt at an embrace was made on either side. The Princess's figure, notwithstanding her dusky mourning robes, was very beautiful and imposing as she stood there in the bright sunlight; but it appeared to make no impression on the young man, albeit he kept his eyes steadily fixed on her.

The mother's gaze was riveted on his face; but she sought in vain there for any reflection of her own features, for any trace which should recall herself. Nothing met her view but a speaking likeness to the man she hated even in death. The father stood before her portrayed in his son, trait for trait.

"I counted upon your visit," went on the Princess, as she sat down and, with a slight wave of her hand, assigned to him a place at her side.

Waldemar did not move.

"Will you not be seated?" The question was put quietly, but it admitted of no refusal, and reminded young Nordeck that he could not conveniently remain standing during the whole of his visit. He took no notice of her repeated gesture, however; but drew forward a chair, and sat down opposite his mother, leaving the place at her side empty.

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