

# The Storyteller

## 'ONE TOUCH OF NATURE'

### I.

'Ah, in Poland, too, it is beautiful!' Ludwiga, the young peasant wife, sighed; her bright eyes glistened, and their long lashes were wet. She drew a toil-roughened hand across them, and set her lips to smother the sob that otherwise might have followed the sigh.

'Yes, but in Poland we could not earn our bread,' answered Casimir, her husband, as he continued to trudge sturdily along the road.

Seen indistinctly from a distance, he might have been mistaken for a pack-horse; for his broad shoulders were laden with a queer assortment of household goods and utensils which obscured his thick-set, muscular figure. Yet, heavy as was the pack, he did not mind the addition to it. In his arms he carried the pride of his heart, little Ladislaus, his two-year-old boy—his and Ludwiga's.

'And have we been able to earn our bread here?' asked the wife, in their liquid Polish dialect—they knew no other tongue. She, too, was bowed and almost hidden from view by the huge, unwieldy bundle upon her back.

At this point on the highway, a handsome equipage, occupied by a girl and an elderly lady and driven by a coachman in livery, passed the wayfarers.

'Why do not these peasant mothers from Europe cast off their burdens, stand erect, and rejoice in the emancipation of their sex in this new country?' exclaimed the younger woman with impatience.

The other laughed in gentle tolerance of her impetuosity.

'The customs of generations cannot be altered in a day,' she said. 'If the woman should refuse to carry the bundle, her husband would probably beat her. The child was pretty. I wish I had snapped my camera.'

If Ludwiga should refuse to toil on with her burden would Casimir indeed compel her obedience with a blow? He had struck her once or twice—alas! yes—when he was in anger, and again when he had tasted wodka (intoxicating liquor) once too often. But that was long ago. Since little Ladislaus had begun to walk and talk and to attract his father by his cunning ways, Ludwiga had taken on a new dignity in the eyes of her husband. Was she not the mother of his son? He would not raise his hand against her now, she would have said.

But why speculate upon an imaginary contingency that could not possibly become actual? To the passer-by our greatest joy may appear a trial. Ludwiga would never refuse to carry the bundle. Not because it was the custom among the women of her country to bear their burdens without complaint, not through fear of her husband, or a stolid recognition of the fact that she must either shoulder it or cast it away, since Casimir would need to be furnished with an extra hand or an extra pair of shoulders in order to carry any more. No: it was simply because, after little Ladislaus and Casimir, the bundle was her chief treasure, being nothing less than one of the finest of fine feather beds, and her marriage dowry. From Ludwiga's childhood, her mother had saved the down with which it was filled; annually the white geese that were her pets disappeared, leaving their softest plumage as a gift to her, and her future wedding-day. This awkward bundle, bound about with rope in a vain attempt to compress its generous proportions, was to her like a great book of recollections—more than that, for a book meant little to Ludwiga. Ah, yes, no matter how weary she might be, she would gladly carry it!

Was it this bulky souvenir of happier times that now, pressing against her head, brought back thoughts of the green fields, the hills, the woods, and river of the dear land far away?

'In our wandering search for work we have sacrificed all but the few things we have with us.'

Her glance swept their scanty belongings comprehensively.

'That is because we set out wrong in taking passage to Savannah instead of to New York,' argued Casimir the buoyant. 'In New York there is a chance for everyone. It is a long journey afoot; but you have never murmured, Ludwiga. That city yonder on the hills is Baltimore. Perhaps I may get some days' work there, and then we can ride a little way on the train, as we have done several times before.'

Ludwiga laughed gaily at the prospect, and the pair trudged on with lighter feet.

It was the springtime, the season when to be out of doors is a joy in itself. Their progress up along the coast had been, in the matter of weather, a pleasant pilgrimage; for as they came gradually north, the miracle of Nature's renewal—of budding trees and crops springing into life, and blossoming plants—was repeated again and again before their eyes; while ever before their imaginations arose the tall buildings of their shining goal, the metropolis, where work, and consequently money, was to be found by everyone.

Now, around Casimir and Ludwiga the pastures were green, the apple orchards just bursting into bloom; before the doors of farmhouses crocuses raised their yellow heads, and the dusty border of grass by the road was strewn with dandelions, like coins flung to the lonely by the young lord, Spring; or rather, it seemed to Ludwiga, bits of brightness sown by divine munificence along the way, that even the wanderers who owned neither fields nor orchards should yet have flowers to pluck.

That they were for him, little Ladislaus never doubted. Struggling to free himself from the strong arms which held him so securely, he stretched out his small fat hands towards the golden treasure, and, in a fluent, infantile outbreak of Ruthenian, pleaded to be set upon his feet.

Ludwiga laughed again, and Casimir put down the child.

'It must be noon,' he said, looking at the sun.

Under a roadside chestnut tree that had recently hung out its floral banners, a sloping bank offered a pleasant resting-place. Casimir made his way thither, cast down his pack, and stretched his length upon the ground. The baby, toddling after, stopped, and bending down tore up a handful of the short grass, shouting with glee.

Ludwiga deposited her dowry at the foot of the tree. When she stood upright, it might be seen that, despite the hardships she had known, she was not ill-looking. Her eyes were brown, her hair was light as the curly pate of little Ladislaus; her face, glowing with color, was gentle and good.

After a few moments, Casimir rose, took a tin bucket that all the way had bobbed about on the top of his pack, and went in search of water. When he returned with a supply obtained from the well of a neighboring farm-house, Ludwiga had loosed the knots of a red kerchief she had carried in one hand, and set forth their frugal dinner—a loaf of rye-flour bread and a dried salted fish. That was all. But hunger makes a banquet of the rudest fare, and the travellers were content.

When the meal was finished, husband and wife sat side by side upon the little knoll, discussing their plans for the future. Casimir plucked a blade of the new grass and drew it through one hand.

'Ludwiga, to get work we must find lodgings in the city,' he said; 'there we cannot sleep out of doors. To have money, we must part with something.'

From the collection of shabby goods in the pack his eyes strayed to the bundle set against the foot of the tree. Ludwiga's heart sank, her eyes grew dim; the relentless hand of Want seemed to clutch her by the throat. What! sell her dowry? She stared at Casimir, wondering if she could have understood him aright.

'We will only pawn it,' he explained; 'and while it is gone, at least you will not have to carry it.'

A tear stole down her cheek, but she wiped it away with a corner of her apron, and bravely accepted the inevitable.

'You and the boy must wait here. I will go into the city, attend to this matter, find a lodging, and return for you, the child, and our goods,' he continued.

Ludwiga was very tired; she had travelled many days. The child lay asleep on her knees. It would be a pity to awaken him.

'If you go alone, you will not taste wodka, my husband?' she entreated. Casimir swore he would not, and forthwith departed. A shrill whistle told him the railroad was near. He cut across the field and took that route, knowing it would be shorter than by the highway.

The afternoon passed pleasantly under the tree. Ludwiga, leaning against its rough bark, napped peacefully; little Ladislaus slept on. After an hour or two, both awoke. The young mother played with the baby, the sun sank to the west; but still Casimir did not come. Ludwiga grew restless, then anxious. Careless of what might befall her scanty possessions, she abandoned them for the nonce, caught the child up in her arms, and ran across the field. In this direction her husband had gone, by this way he might be returning.

Before she reached the end of the pasture, the prolonged shriek of a locomotive rent the air. Ludwiga had come to know that this demoniacal voice was not always a warning of danger. Why, then, did it strike