

## DIARY OF MARIE WALEWSKA

I was in my drawing room in Paris one evening in 1809, when I was informed of the visit of a fellow countrywoman, unfortunately famous for having been able to attract the great man, whose power was, at the time, boundless.

I knew her only by sight. I didn't even know she had come to Paris. My first impulse was to not receive her, but curiosity prevailed. She entered gracefully and shyly. A slight tinge of pink colored her dazzling white complexion. She lowered her azure blue eyes. Her beautiful smile marked the desire to conquer the unfavorable prejudice she felt she saw in my manner, showing me two rows of dazzling pearly white teeth in the most gracious, freshest mouth in the world.

"I come to you," she said, in a soft and harmonious voice. "A recent arrival in this capital, where I know no one. I dare to flatter myself that you will not refuse me your services and advice needed by someone who has just arrived here."

I was surprised by this request. I wasn't expecting it at all. So I did not hold back. "You should know, Madame, that I live here in the *Faubourg Saint Germain* and see only a few friends, whose lives are similar to mine. This small, extremely humble circle could not suit you. You were made to shine in and charm larger, more important arenas."

"Ah, Madame," she cried, with a reproachful, soft and prestigious tone, "You dismiss me and yet you know me so little and so badly! I hate high society – I am ill at ease there. My fateful star pushed me there against my better judgment.

Now more than ever the false brilliance of this great theater hurts me and does not make my heart happy. Ah! If only I could be free to at least follow this preference, you would see that my sole desire is to fight against my fatal destiny."

Disarmed by such an innocent confession, by such a touching expression of regret and suffering covering this pleasant face, so young and attractive, moved by two big tears ready to fall like dewdrops on a white rose, and that proved so powerfully that her heart was full, that she needed to pour out her feelings, I took her hand spontaneously. I was still feeling only pity. I was far from being persuaded. She was starting to win me over.

"You see how appealing I find you, but know," I said, "that I value the type of life that I have adopted too much to not be worried about being pulled into something that would take me away from my preferences, my opinions and the limits of my fortune."

"Ah! Don't worry about anything. I will not take advantage of the gratifying relationship for which you allow me to hope." Barely had she spoken these words than my door opened, and elderly Madame C..., protector of the poor and unfortunate, entered, exhausted.

"Sit down, you must have climbed up to your fifteen attics; your legs must be tired." Madame de Walewska rose at the unexpected arrival and got ready to leave, unfurling her Turkish shawl to wrap herself in, but what she heard of our conversation made her sit back down on the sofa.

“Yes, I walked a great deal this morning, but I didn’t do much, because I cannot bring a father back to the most appealing and worthy family, who deserves to keep him.

You see that I am overwhelmed by the picture that I just saw. Mr. Brinart, from a distinguished family, enjoyed a large fortune, which he lost during the Revolution. Responsible for a large family, he has suffered every misfortune. Most recently, out of devotion to his young family, he accepted a job at the offices of the Duke Rovigo.

But long-standing grief and continual, forced labor without respite exhausted the strength of the unfortunate father. He has been bedridden for nine months, with no hope of recovery and no image before him other than his seven pale, wan children, crying around him, and an elderly, paralytic mother. A poor lady, who lives next to them on the sixth floor at 158 rue Saint Victor, told me all of this. They were on their last piece of bread when I went to their home.”

“And the Duke Rovigo is unaware of their difficulties,” said Madame de Walewska quietly.

“Well, Madame, the entourage of the lucky and the powerful repels misfortune and does not allow this sort of information to reach them.”

Lovely Madame de Walewska slipped away. Elderly Madame C. continued her do-gooder path and soon after, I saw a fellow countryman enter. I had known him quite well in the past in my country, where he felt truly honored just to be in my company and that of my family, but he had lost his benevolent attentiveness in Paris, seeing that I lived in the *Faubourg Saint Germain*, out of favor of the court, and judging that my lowly and secluded life could hold no charm for him, nor serve as a rung for him to climb any higher than my circle of usual relations.

This time, however, he entered without even being announced, all radiant with a veneer of affected attentiveness, which struck me all the more as I had noticed his lack of concern a few days earlier in several meetings, so different from his expression at this present moment. I received him tersely, even frostily. I found the way in which he appeared, unannounced, improper and my haughty manner conveyed this to him. But he pretended not to notice and took over the conversation loudly, trying to be pleasant, to distract and lead my imagination into the circles of the Court, where he gained admittance from time to time, telling a series of new anecdotes about the most memorable figures.

He revealed many hidden things wittily, certainly to be listened to with pleasure and to dissolve my resentful memories with these secrets, passionately snatched up by feminine curiosity. Indeed, my thoughts, focusing on the biographical panorama he was presenting to me, softened to the narrator; I started to smile. Mr. Polenski glowed with his success, without however being able to make me aware of the reason he was making such an effort to be pleasant to me.

The visit would have extended past the time I normally retired to bed, had I not interrupted the conversation myself to tell him that I didn’t want him to waste an entire evening that he could go and end more pleasantly.

This personal abnegation earned me the most obliging comments, with repeated expressive protestations and the promise to devote all the time he had available to me in the future.

Completely amazed by such a sudden change, I didn't have time to think. The confusion of the evening's events divided my attention and I went to bed with the sole thought that it is certainly difficult to resist the power of mental and sentimental seduction, as prepared as one may be, from individuals who use this prestigious desire to remove legitimate disapproval. A voice inside me seemed to reproach me for abandoning wise and far-sighted resolutions for my rest, to form contacts or even social relations only with people in whom I recognized genuine moral value, and whose tastes and positions were in keeping with my own. This voice seemed to condemn, saying, 'where are you with your firm resolutions?' An attractive, sweet, childlike face with an air of modesty, sadness and suffering captivates you and makes you forget such justified prejudices. These external appearances are perhaps misleading and you will head blindly into a few traps that will lead you into annoyances, because you could encourage your young fellow countrywoman to continue along the path on which she has gotten stuck!

And if you make her hear the voice of truth, what do you not have to fear of a man, who, with one word, can crush you like an atom?

And this man, whom you still despised this morning and that a few deceptively benevolent comments seasoned with gossip replaced in your relationship.

Ah, yes, it's true, I thought. You must retreat while there's still time.

I foresaw a thousand distressing, unpleasant results that clashed with my true self from these two rapprochements. They must be broken off at all costs.

Determined to do so, I fell asleep with no worries, happy to be at peace with my judge and inner counselor, and I would probably have extended my peaceful slumber, had I not been awakened almost with a start and struck with surprise, to see my bed surrounded by people and children I didn't know, raising their hands to the sky and calling for all blessings to be bestowed on me.

At the head of this congregation, the charitable Madame C... made herself heard over the others.

"Your awakening is a sight for sore eyes, Madame," she said, "So I didn't hesitate to wake you. This is the family that you saved from despair, that you have brought back to life. Yes, my children, it's she, it can only be she."

"What's going on? I don't know if I'm dreaming or if I'm awake; I don't understand anything," I said, rubbing my eyes.

"You certainly wanted to hide your good deed, Madame; it can only be you."

"But, what are you talking about?"

"Well, after leaving you last night, I visited a few more of my poor families. When I arrived home, the woman from the rue Saint Victor arrived and told me everything. How you arrived around nine o'clock at her home, wearing a big hat with a veil, which hid your face, how you climbed to her..., how you asked her with some kind of foreign accent which struck her, "Madame, do you know the unfortunate family living in this house, this ill, dying father? Take me to them," you said to her. She took you to the home of misfortune; you cried when you

saw the misery and pain and put an end to it, giving them 2,000 francs along with the promise of ensuring their future.

The father's broken, destroyed soul seemed to regain new strength; he wanted to throw himself at your feet. The children surrounded you, clasping you in their arms, asking you loudly to tell them your name so they would know their benefactor. You were deaf to their questions and you slipped away so quickly, taking the stairs four at a time, that they were unable to keep up with you and follow you. But when they returned, they found your bracelet, which apparently fell off your arm. Here it is."

I took the bracelet to examine it. It was a wide gold chain, fastened with a round locket with the circumference of a small *ecu*, covered on the outside and inside with an attractive grid of diamond dust, concealing the portrait of a child, represented as a little Raphael angel. Surrounded by dark clouds, his small, ash blond head rested on his arms.

Beneath the locket, I found the following words traced on a small piece of vellum covering a lock of child's hair when I opened the other grid.

"My God, forgive and take pity on the innocent creature." These words easily pointed me in the right direction. With a serious expression, I declared that I had nothing to do with the kind deed, but I added that the lost object would point me in the direction of the real benefactor, and that I wanted to keep it so I could make sure and that I would let them know what I found out later.

When everyone had left, I thought, "Here is yet another very enticing turn of events. How will you resist?" It was embarrassing, I admit, but I had still made up my mind to get out while the going was good. Mr. Polenski returned in a few days; I dodged his visit by having him told that I was out. He tried again several days in a row – I was sick in bed.

He wrote me a note to ask insistently to meet for extremely important reasons. Unable to get rid of him any longer other than by using tricks to remain incognito, I just didn't have the energy to avoid him. My irrevocable intention was to avoid him, giving him the least amount of access to my home, but always doing so with a woman's delicate touch.

I was thus forced to receive him and invent new, civilized ways to get rid of him. After a new batch of new anecdotes and private memories, I decided to get straight to the point, asking him about the important reasons that had brought him to my home, but he didn't give me a chance. "So what do you think about Madame de Walewska?" "But I don't know her." "What?" (he seemed alarmed). "But she was at your home. Someone told me so."

"As soon as she arrived, she asked one of my friends, who assured me that you were very close, for your address, that she was counting especially on your social circle here." "I don't know," I said, "what she was intending to do, but the fact is that I never knew her in my country." "And you haven't been to see her here?" "No, Sir." "But she has been to your home; I know it (and he stamped his foot energetically, emphasizing his point: yes, I know it)." "Yes, a moment, a visit of convenience, but I don't think that she'll return, she couldn't thrive in my circle." (I was laughing up my sleeve, examining Mr. Polenski's disappointment and long face). With a smile conveying proud pity, his impatience was discernable in spite of himself. Nature took its palette and brush and painted in this gaze, in this insulting smile, in this shrug of the shoulders and this energetic leg movement, truly distinct characteristics which conveyed to me this lovely compliment.

“And, fool that you are, you just don’t know that you could take this ladder fate is offering you to reach the heavens – you don’t have the good sense to grab it. You could help others – and especially good men like me – find their way to this brilliant glory which leads to fortune, honor and pleasure!

And you let this elusive fate escape. This opportunity will not come along twice!

Is it foolishness or prudishness?”

This is what I read in this man’s face, as though the words were embedded therein.

But a thought crossed his mind; his coloring and characteristic traits disappeared as quickly as they appeared. In order to succeed, you must always have self-control. So now he adopted his affected and pleasant tone again. “Madame de Walewska is a charming person and certainly worthy of the great man’s affection. His respect sets her apart from all the other ladies who have had the good fortune of pleasing him – I learned that from a source... Since his arrival, Duroc is always running between the Tuileries and the rue de Richelieu. I noticed on the evening he arrived at the opera, that His Majesty’s spyglass was always pointing at her gated box, which the audience certainly found intriguing.

You can see that I was informed about everything, which I found amusing. This charming head appeared through this railing, like a child’s head, and everyone was surprised at the direction of the august gaze, because I ask you, who here would believe that the place that has fueled the ambition and glory of people like Lavalère, Montespan, Pompadour and so many others, would be veiled in mysterious obscurity by a young woman from the provinces, hiding as though from a crime. And of course, he who has conquered the world certainly deserves such royal illusions!

Duroc had had a box prepared for her opposite the Emperor, but she refused obstinately to appear there. This false shame makes one think that she is not used to being around so many people, but Paris will educate her.

Now, please tell me, Madame, why are you so uneager to see her, to attract her to you when she is open to it? Have you calculated all of the advantages that you could enjoy for the country as well as for yourself and your friends?” “I don’t think so, Sir; there are actually many inconveniences, because if I influenced her in any way, I would make a lot of enemies, and you yourself would not be satisfied.” At this comment, he made a horrid, furious face, but, controlling his anger, he left.

I thought that I was in the clear for a long time, but ambition does not give up easily: if it imagines that it has found a way to launch an attack, difficulties would not stop it. This type of person does not notice scorn, or even insults or the door. They cross thresholds fearlessly.

When he left, I burst out laughing, because Madame de Walewska, hiding in my bathroom adjacent to the drawing room, had heard everything. The fact is that all of my resolutions to be harsh with her had ended up yielding to beauty, benevolent kindness and repentant misfortune.

Since her first visit, the crowd of gossipmongers and veiled solicitors bothered me to such an extent that I gave my doorman the very express order to turn these people away under various pretexts.

The order given for everyone had been carried out correctly, even for Madame de Walewska, who showed up at my door, which I didn't know. Shortly thereafter, I received the following note: "I stopped by your home the other day, but your doorman was relentless. I was even more distressed to learn of your indisposition. Please tell me that you are in good health and permit me to tell you that the fear of being rejected by someone of whom I think highly and whom I wish to know is a painful doubt. Oh, if you only knew how unhappy I am, you would open your door and your heart to me!  
Marie"

"Only someone with a cold, hard heart could refuse you entry to either," was the response I wrote hastily. She arrived almost immediately.

Her dazzling whiteness stood out even more against her black velvet dress. Blond curls played on her childish cheeks. Although youth shone in her soft and tender gaze, the melancholy sadness of her soul was revealed.

She approached me with affection. "Oh, you are kind!" was the first thing she said.

I took her hand affectionately and gave her the bracelet. "Oh!" I said, "What prejudices could exist after your good deed? How could I resist the charm of kindness and unfortunate benevolence?"

It was now impossible to deny the good deed. "There is no merit in this, because it is the only thing that soothes my soul from the weight that oppresses it. My nature has always pointed me in the direction of personal devotion; unfortunately, people have taken advantage of this natural tendency to lead me onto a precipice from which I cannot see the bottom. Oh yes, I need a friend! A friend with a heart to whom I can tell my pains, a friend who will give me good advice and reassure and calm my troubled conscience.

I hoped to find such a friend in you, because I am suspicious of all of these friendships that flock to my door. So many diverse interests press around me, that escaping these self-interested importunities, if only for a moment, would already be a godsend."

"Well," I said, "Let's make a secret pact. My door will always be open to you, and I assure you of my sympathetic interest, on one specific condition. We shall hide this relationship for a thousand reasons that you should understand, and especially so that those annoying people do not follow you and I am not forced to receive them and extend my social circle."

She liked this mystery, this hope for peace and health. "Yes," she said, embracing me affectionately, "That's a good idea.

I will return to your home only by coach or by foot, all the while hiding my good fortune.

I will come to you for the consolation and fortitude needed by someone in my position. Oh, I would be so relieved, if you were to tell me that which so many others have told me, which caused my fall, that divine Providence used me as an instrument needed for the

rebirth of our beloved homeland. I could perhaps recover the peace of mind that I have lost; I could perhaps be more resigned to a destiny that is so inconsistent with my conscience. Oh, if you only knew the traps that have been set for me, the type of seduction that has been used, the hopes that have intoxicated me. Here, let's not wait until later. I am going to explain to you my entire past and my portfolio, which I will send for, will give you a few pieces of literal proof."

"You can, with no fear of being interrupted. I've had my door closed. Let's sit in this wing chair next to the fire, in the style of our country, somewhat Asian, it's true, but the relaxation and comfort afforded is delightful for an intimate chat."

After settling comfortably into the wing chair, Madame de Walewska began (1):

(1) This narration continued over several days at different times. Before going to bed, I made sure to note down each evening's story.

"My family, although old nobility, is not wealthy. Political shocks have always been fatal for your homeland's worthy sons!

My parents, who lived in a small village that remained from their hereditary property, located 20 miles from Walewice, were concerned only with putting it to good use to support a large family. I was still a little girl when I had the misfortune of losing my father. My mother, who remained a widow with six children (I was the fifth-born), was reduced to strict vigilance to cover the needs of her position, so she devoted herself completely to this provincial life and agricultural and domestic economy that was the only way to lighten her load. You know how where we come from, taking care of a plot of land, as small as it may be, requires work, vigilance and care, when you don't want to employ fickle eyes and hands to see and act. So you will easily understand that my mother was unable to see to our education. After having a kind, poor, aristocratic old man provide us with elements of primary education – reading, writing, catechism and arithmetic (he was also tasked with writing economic registers), she sent my brothers to secondary school and the girls to a boarding school in the same town and later, to perfect this sketch of provincial life and give it a certain veneer, thought essential for our debut in Warsaw society.

So the boarding schools, good in terms of morals and religious principles, were barely capable of giving us accurate notions of the knowledge and talents required in the world for which we were being raised. A little French, German, which we murdered, a few mazurkas, waltzes and polonaises banged out tastelessly, out of time, on a bad piano, and dance. This was the extent of our education.

My older sister left earlier and was married within the year. I yearned for the same destiny. Showing no aptitude for the incomplete talents that I was forced to acquire and which I sensed were inferior, I felt as though I were wasting my time.

Two feelings took over my entire being: the love of God and that of my country! I attributed the first to a natural tendency that I consider to be a special grace from the sovereign provider of all and that reading good books and receiving Christian teachings developed in me. I owed my sense of patriotism to my family, the people close to me, my country, the air of my homeland. How many times since I was a sweet young girl have I cried bitter tears,

listening to stories of the misfortunes of our ill-fated country! Foreign encroachment, the horrors perpetrated in Prague, the humiliation of my nation all stirred up a sense of indignation in my very core. How many times during confession would my confessor say to me, "My daughter, forgive the enemies of your country as your Savior forgave his assassins; hatred should not dwell in a young heart such as yours." "My Father," I would reply, "The crimes they commit are evil; they violate the law of God and I hate and despise that." Haven't you taught me to hate vice?

I was by nature sweet, indolent and calm. Nothing could upset me more deeply than when people predicted, pushing me to the limit, that I would marry an enemy German or Russian. I felt unworthy simply by this assumption, and I jumped, as though burned by a hot iron. I felt deep contempt of all of my fellow countrywomen who silenced the voice of patriotism to listen only to that of their heart or ambition, by marrying the oppressors. So people often teased me with this. With these feelings, I went to boarding school and I left when I was 15 and a half to return to my mother's home.

With all her money worries, my mother barely had the time to examine me. However, at first glance, she reacted favorably to me, because she said, cupping my chin in her hand, "Marie has gotten prettier. God willing, she will find a husband soon – that would be one less to worry about."

A few days after I had settled into the family home, it happened to be the Saturday before Pentecost, she ordered me to prepare myself meticulously for the following day, because, she said, we were going to mass at the parish church in Walewice. As Count de Walewski, the lord of the area, generally invites his neighbors to dine at his chateau, I presume that we will be compelled to go there and I want you to show yourself to your best advantage!"

I was too young to understand what my mother meant, and I was fond enough of finery to enjoy complying with her wishes, but with no ulterior motive other than being well dressed and enjoying myself.

Moreover, I knew that the Count de Walewski was an elderly 70-year-old man, whose grandson was nine years older than me. A widower for 15 years, he lived in the country, where he saw only his neighbors, when he met them at church. I knew nothing further, and I was in no way curious to know anything else.

When I arrived at the church, I gave all my attention to God. It wasn't until the holy service had ended that I saw old Count de Walewski approach my mother, compliment her on my return and my appearance, extending the expected invitation.

At the chateau, I realized that the pleasures of my day would not be cheerful. Our gathering was limited to the master of the house, the parish priest and a few sad-looking individuals. After initial compliments were exchanged, my mother noticed a piano in the drawing room and hastened to open it, to showcase that which she called my talents. I tried to resist, but I had to submit graciously and play my repertoire of dances... although they were played quite badly on a piano, my audience still applauded me enthusiastically.

"I am upset that I cannot play as well," said my mother, to my great sorrow, "you should see her dance – that's what she excels at." "Well, Madame, I'm counting on you to provide me with this pleasure – would you accept a ball at my home? I want to offer you this immediately." "I would love to," replied my mother, delighted. "It's up to rich lords such as



yourself, Count, to organize get-togethers for poor neighbors like us and make it easier for mothers to have the chance to show off their daughters and establish them.”

These comments pained me, but the hope of a ball pleased me, despite this annoyance. For all I knew was hearsay and it had been described to me as the peak of pleasure.

During the meal, Count de Walewski was very attentive to me. Jams, sweets – nothing was spared. You can certainly tell that I paid more attention to that than to the person who was offering them to me.

To make a long story short, loaded with bags of sweets, nougat and bouquets, we left Count de Walewski with the promise to return the following Sunday, to prepare the ball...

“My dear Marie,” said my mother, as we were crossing the chateau’s extensive courtyard and beautiful avenues by carriage, “It wouldn’t be so bad if you could reign here. I would be happy and at peace during my old age...” “What are you talking about, mother?” (because I didn’t understand). “Oh, my child, don’t you see? Count de Walewski is old, it’s true, but he is sad as well.”

“If he married you, in keeping with the customs of the country, he would have to give you a great fortune, as he is a widower and you are a girl. All of his children are already established and far away. He is kind and gentle and you would be able to do anything you pleased. And this beautiful chateau, this park, this magnificent furniture would all give you an enormous sense of well-being. You could help your brothers and sisters and provide me with happiness in my old age.”

I had neither the strength nor the courage to respond and I looked my mother in the eyes to see if she was serious. Seeing how serious she was, her face clouded over with a tinge of sternness, I didn’t know what to think. I was dumbfounded.

She continued, “I certainly noticed the effect you had on the old man. He didn’t take his eyes off you for the entire mass and the meal, and if you wanted to be a bit obliging and kind, I am absolutely convinced that the week after the ball, he would give you the title of Countess Walewska and his beautiful chateau!”

“Oh, God forbid!” I responded spontaneously. Barely had the words left my mouth than a vigorous slap made me regret them. Used to fearing and honoring my mother, even in her fits of anger, I gave no further response. My tears rolled down my cheeks, while she continued to reprimand me, assuring me that if I lost this match by rejecting him, I would also lose her affection forever, that with no dowry, because the village income was barely enough to keep my brothers, I could not count on a love match, that I was a burden on her, that she had incurred a debt to pay for my education, and that at any rate, in a word, it would be better for me as well as for my family to marry an old but rich man, than to struggle along miserably like my older sister, who had married for love, but who had many children with no means to support them and who regretted thinking only of love shortly thereafter.

However, all of these reflections made little impression on my spirit, because the image of 70-year-old Count de Walewski was too hideous for a 15 and a half-year-old imagination.

Nevertheless, this did not prevent me from thinking seriously about getting ready for the ball. I hoped as well that old Count de Walewski would not want to ridicule himself with such a disproportionate marriage.

Besides, we are so ready to push away tiresome thoughts and to surround ourselves with pleasant ones, at my age, so I blocked the dark future with lots of gauze, bouquets, garlands of flowers, crowning everything with the magic of the ball, dancing, that I ended up seeing nothing but roses without thorns.

Finally, the big day arrived. My mother watched me get ready and was so satisfied, that she told me, "You look good, very good, but I will love you only when you help me with all your powers to succeed in my plan, because then we would be very happy, thanks to you."

I kissed my mother's hand, without, however, promising to make her happy. We left. Many horses and carriages crowded the courtyard of the chateau. I shivered. It was my first entrance into society and I already saw the old Count, with a large bouquet of roses, like a husband, arrayed like it was a wedding day, wearing a morning coat of the chamberlain of King Stanislas Poniatowski, impressively adorned with a blue sash and decoration holding back (cordons-bleus), with the bouquet, the sole lock of grey hair which the wind blew back, in spite of his efforts, and presenting us with the other as we got out of the carriage.

I was unpleasantly struck by this bouquet of barely blooming roses against this old, bald head.

"I was impatiently awaiting the queen of my ball," he told me (presenting me with), arriving on the peristyle (the beautiful bouquet). He offered my mother his arm, and I followed them into the drawing room, which was well lit and bustling with a great many guests, to whom my mother presented me. Dazzled and embarrassed by the flattering praise uttered all around me, I didn't make anything out, because I was stunned by the novelty of my surroundings.

After tea, we moved to the ballroom, where Count de Walewski opened the ball with a polonaise with my mother. The most distinguished-looking young man invited me to dance. I had noticed that he had been presented to my mother, but his name escaped me.

Timid, not knowing anyone there, I dared not ask his name. But his grace, his appearance of ease and noble manners as well as the many decorations that adorned his buttonhole gave him such superiority in this group that I could not help but be curious and notice him.

He was able to take advantage of the time that we spent walking together as the polonaise dances followed one after the other and that he was able to navigate skillfully, very often taking up his place near me. So well that when the dance ended, I remained convinced that his spirit was as pleasing as his face and his manners.

But soon all of these favorable prejudices that filtered through quickly and captivated my young imagination with fantastic dreams, desires to be found pleasing, and vague but pleasant hopes were destroyed suddenly by a single word. When Count de Walewski, taking him by the hand and moving towards me, said to me, "Here is bird of passage that I stopped to introduce to you: he is a partner worthy of you. I already did so when you arrived, but Mr. de Souvarov finds it inadequate."

No, I am not capable of conveying the internal upheaval that shook me when I heard this name – for being among our homeland’s most relentless enemies.

Mr. de Souvarov didn’t move, gazing at me silently. He was very mistaken about this confusion that was so visible and that I could not suppress, it troubled me so. With a joy that was similar to rapture, he thought that, through the fascination of a first look of love, he had ignited this spark that mutual sympathy transforms into a passionate inferno. He was dreaming the same appealing dreams as I had been a few moments previously. While resisting with horror the image that had pleased me so, I forced myself to feel only regret that I had almost admired a man who bore a name that was odious to me.

In a word, he was Russian and my heart revolted against this origin; I saw it tinged with the blood of my fellow countrymen, oppressing my native land.

But while I was avoiding his burning eyes which continued to follow me, searching for me everywhere, he became even more attentive, undoubtedly misconstruing the icy expression I forced myself to wear instead of the completely different one I had before we were introduced, for shyness and the awkwardness of youth.

Near the end of the ball, Count de Walewski came to congratulate me on my brilliant conquest.

“It’s possible,” I said, “but it’s not mutual. I will never be able to love a Souvarov.”

“You are very difficult, Mademoiselle Marie. Mr. de Souvarov is a charming man. All the ladies of Warsaw are fighting over him. In addition to his personal advantages, he has a vast fortune.” “Oh,” I exclaimed, “He probably acquired it by confiscating it from the noble, dignified victims robbed by his father.”

“Pooh! Tell me no more of such an awful thing.”

“But the father is not the son. Are you aware that he has very noble sentiments, that he values our nation and in no way approves of the ‘survival-of-the-fittest’ rights exercised by his country? He was returning from London, when his carriage broke down on the high road, a mile from here, forcing him to come to my home to ask for my workers, who are skillful. I complied with his request on the condition that he attend my ball. He dared not refuse, although it obviously annoyed him very much. And now that he has seen you, like Penelope with her embroidery, he wants the wheels and springs of his carriage that were fixed to be broken again.

He is very surprised to have found his ideal, as he put it to me, at a provincial ball. So don’t dismiss him, Mademoiselle Marie, his admiration should at least earn him a warm welcome.” “Oh, Sir, a Russian should never expect a warm welcome from me.”

“Come, come, an attractive, kind, spiritual, rich man always has these attributes, regardless of his homeland.”

“That may be true for others, but not for me.”

“Why not? For example, if I compared myself with him, Mademoiselle Marie, what would you say? Would you prefer me to him?”

“Let’s not discuss this any further, Count.”

“No, no, I want to test you and see just how far you will go for your country. I won’t drop this. You must answer my question.

If you had no other option but an elderly fellow countryman and a pleasing young Russian, which one...”

“Certainly my countryman, if I had no other choice.”

Ah! Here is another restriction: throughout this entire conversation, Mr. de Souvarov was watching and listening to us, but he didn’t understand what we were saying because we were speaking in our native language. At the end, bored by the length of our conversation, he interrupted us, placing himself in front of me, which, in this moment of crisis forced on me by the old Count, was truly helpful in terms of my awkward situation. I was pleased, all the while looking upset.

Nevertheless, Mr. de Souvarov ended up noticing the curtness of my responses, which should have been effusive.

Although he tried to use everything magical about a smitten heart to show me his exclusive preference, the strong impression that I had made on his heart, I remained silent, cold, curt, no longer looking him in the eyes.

I saw sadness in his gaze. He seemed to give privilege to fascination. I had felt it... Soon, a tinge of bitter disappointment and sadness replaced the gaiety and ease that distinguished him at the beginning of the ball.

Enjoying my success, my mother made up her mind that we would get the most desired results and was one of the last to leave. I had to remind her that it was very late and that most people had left.

In the middle of the exhilaration of pleasure and the triumphs of vanity, an uneasiness, which I wanted to hide from myself, was upsetting me terribly.

I hoped to make it stop by returning to our peaceful home. We were unable to leave the drawing room unnoticed. The master of the house, after receiving my thanks, offered his arm to my mother. Count de Souvarov seized mine with ardor and, while leading me to the carriage, said to me intensely, “I would be too unhappy if I were to have only memories of this delightful evening, which I certainly was not expecting here!”

I had neither the time nor the strength to respond. Extricating my hand, which he pressed against his heart, I jumped into the carriage with the rush of fear eluding danger.

We left. My mother, preoccupied with her plans, built castles in Spain the whole way home, asking me questions, which I answered wrong, because I was no longer listening to her. I was shaken internally. I was annoyed with myself. I tried to push away the image that I associated with all the hatred of my patriotism, but it returned constantly adorned with all the seduction of this gaze that I had barely known and that followed me with all these

expressions of love, all these promises of happiness and made my heart race! There was no point in seeking any others, I was scared that I had seen no one, noticed no one – except him! Everything was fading – the memory of the party, the dance, pleasure – everything, except him!

So by associating violently with the opinion that had dominated my entire life, I liked to state to anyone who would listen, which had earned me the nickname of zealous patriot. I trembled, searching my heart and finding it still so different from the day before. So, arriving home, the first thing I did – even before taking off my ball gown and the flowers that covered me – was to fall on my knees at the foot of my bed, calling out for divine assistance. Never had I prayed with more fervor. The sole request that flooded from my entire being was, “My God, my Father, do not allow me to give my heart and my affections to an enemy of my homeland and my religion.”

Calmer after this fervent prayer, I went to bed without being able to fall asleep. When my eyelids closed and I dozed off from weariness, the dangerous image that I wanted to dismiss was reproduced in my dreams.

I got up before dawn and ran to the garden to cool my burning head. I liked to grow flowers; watering, attaching and tidying them up were usually my first task each morning. I sometimes spent too long on this task, for which I was often reprimanded, because it made me forget about more useful things. Well, that was not the case this time: I barely looked at them – it is so true that when a strong thought takes up your entire soul, there is room for nothing else.

I resorted to prayer again, and I noticed that it was the only effective form of relief to calm the battle between my head and my heart. As a result, I constantly tried to mimic Jesus Christ, looking to the chapters of the Bible for inspiration concerning my situation.

Through repetition, I memorized the part of chapter 11 about how one must examine and curb the desires of one’s heart. In chapter 13, I learned the kind of resistance needed to ward off temptation. In chapter 15, I learned that in all things, one must ask God for help and have faith that one will regain His grace. I learned in chapter 35 that during this life, one is not at all safe from temptations without prayer, and in chapter 36 that one must never let one’s imagination take a wrong path and that one must know how to guide it.

Less demoralized, strengthened by the divine guidance in which I had complete faith, I took fresh heart for the fight.

Several neighbors came to see us. As they were personal friends of my mother, I was unable to avoid their jokes.

“Well, Mademoiselle Marie, what do you think about Russians now? Do you still think they are like bears?”

“Will you still criticize women who have broken away from their patriotism to yield to the irresistible impulses of a passion justified by the union of so many advantages?”

I turned pale, I knew it, and yet I kept up my role until the very end. My lips said the opposite of what I was feeling inside, but I didn’t hesitate to maintain, “I will only ever have one opinion on the matter.”

“Nevertheless, you admit that you couldn’t ask for anyone more charming, more kind, with more aristocratic manners. A face that at first glance arouses a sense of kindness – we all felt that when we saw him.”

“I admit it, but a Polish woman must close her eyes to all such perfections, remembering the past and fearing the future.” That was my response.

Before the day was over, Count de Walewski stopped by with his formidable guest.

I was on eggshells, fearing that an open gaze would betray my intimate impressions, especially in front of those who, I know, would be examining me closely to triumph over my defeat and presumption.

We talked about general things. I was in a position to facilitate no specific topic of conversation. He surprised us with his knowledge of the history of our country, speaking enthusiastically about our men who are famous for their patriotism and devotion to their homeland. Each one of his words struck a chord in my heart and increased this magnetism that attracted me, in spite of my firm willpower about him, but I persisted with my resolve, whispering fervent prayers to Heaven, asking for God’s support.

Towards evening, someone suggested that we take a walk. I saw the satisfaction of Mr. de Souvarov, that he wanted to take part and that he was preparing to make a declaration that I dreaded, trembling with fear, and to which I did not know how to respond.

Despite my false pretexts and the excuses that I was seeking to dodge his arm, I couldn’t defend myself without being impolite. As my mother had ordered me to do so, I had to accept.

In spite of the harmony and sympathy of the feeling, our walk showed the effects of our different and opposite desires. I adjusted my steps to those of the group around us and from which I did not want to be separated, whereas Mr. de Souvarov slowed his pace to get me away from the others and break the silence that was oppressing him.

I tried my best, but he found a way to make me notice his sorrowful, reproachful gaze, which penetrated me. “Oh!” he whispered, “Could I possibly have the misfortune of not being understood? Or else you do not wish to understand me.”

Know at least, Mademoiselle Marie, that yours is the only air I wish to breathe. I breathed it in but a moment and already it has intoxicated me. Anything else is torture to me now. I feel so good!

I sniff this air with delight, because it surrounds you. If it is not yet true happiness, it is at least the indication that I am certainly close to it. Would you please help me find it? Would you be so insensitive, so cruel as to refuse me?”

My feet were shaking, the quickened beating of my heart silenced me, so that I could not respond.

I felt that my response was going to be decisive, irrevocable. I knew that I was going to forever relinquish any happiness that my heart might have. I hesitated. Pity, constricted love was going to burst and break all the barriers opposing its overflow.

I looked to the sky and He sent me strength to answer firmly, “I should not be the only one to make him find happiness – too much distance separates us for us to be able to come together.”

“Distance! Oh! With a jump, I will cross all the distance between us! Just one word and I will never leave you again. Oh, Mademoiselle Marie, look at me!”

I didn’t have the heart to, but I was able to cry, while escaping, “Never, never!” Tears poured down my cheeks. I covered my face with a handkerchief, pretending that I had a bloody nose, and double-locked myself into my room, where I surrendered to my tears.

“Oh, my God,” I thought, “Presumption and pride have been my downfall. Where is the strength of which I was proud? I criticized the others, and the same guilty sentiment took hold of me with such violence that I no longer feel like I can fight it.

My God! My Father! Forgive me, take pity on me, heal me and support me where I am weak.” I remained this way, as though crushed, prostrate before the divine images suspended above my bed.

My mother knocked on my door. I pretended that I had a violent headache. She was alarmed when she saw me. “What is wrong with you? Your eyes look like you’ve been crying. It’s yesterday’s dance that has made you unwell! Sleep and you’ll feel better.” After giving me this advice, she left, having no idea of the dreadful tempest that I was feeling and that made impossible the refreshing sleep that she believed to be an infallible remedy.

The rest of the day as well as the following night left me with an indelible memory of sadness. I sometimes feared that I would descend into the depths of my heart and my ideas were being shattered. Sometimes the seduction returned, with all its magic. Ways to reconcile my conflicting desires were flocking to me. Then, ridicule, malicious triumphs and the disapproval of all the noble and worthy patriots was like a specter that suppressed my soul’s desire and I cried bitter tears.

At eight o’clock in the morning, my maid announced the arrival of old Count de Walewski.

I instructed her to tell my mother that I was unable to be at breakfast or leave my bed, as I felt worse, not better. Making an appearance in the drawing room seemed like torture to me, so I went back to bed and pretended to be asleep.

My mother came several times, placing her hand on my forehead and burning cheeks. “She has a high fever,” she said, “But it will pass... Let me know when she wakes up.” I paid no attention during the visit. I heard the sound of a carriage and presumed it was that of Count de Walewski. I opened my eyes. My mother rushed to my side. “He’s left. Listen, Marie. What I’m about to say might revive you.

I have two proposals for you. You have the right to choose, but you do not have the right to refuse both – and I don’t believe that you would be that foolish.

Count de Walewski started off by making me a lovely declaration on behalf of Mr. de Souvarov. This young Russian lord is laying his fortune, his titles and his heart at your feet. He is offering you all the advantages of wealth that I will need, subscribing to all the conditions that I would want to impose on him, and promising to acquire a piece of land nearby so that you would remain close to your country and your family! What do you have to

say about that? Here is a letter for you about it,” (and she gave me the letter, which I dared not open) continuing:

“Make a decision. I admit that despite my distance from and even hatred for this cursed race that is an enemy to our beloved homeland, I find this young man to be very accomplished and my prejudices do not include him. What do you say?”

It’s not that I would prefer him to our old Count de Walewski as a son-in-law, but I would imagine that you would prefer the younger man. If, however, as the old Count assured me, you still persist in your steadfast determination to reject a Russian, he has also stepped into the ring with the most dazzling offers.

You must admit, Marie, that it is very kind of him to offer you his rival, whom he believes is more worthy than himself to possess you.

So if your patriotism prevents you from accepting one, you must listen to the other.”

“My mother,” I cried tearfully, stretching my hands out to her, “Have pity on me. I don’t like either one.”

“I told you, Marie, you are free to choose, But God forbid you repeat those words (her stern expression left me aghast).”

“You must choose one of them immediately if you don’t want to incur my, my...”

“Mother, stop. Do not utter this dreadful word,” I said, jumping out of bed and falling at her feet, with despair in my soul. “Do you not know that my desire will always bend to yours?”

Give me to Count de Walewski.”

I would never know happiness again. I gave it up of my own free will. I followed my head, which happened to conflict with my heart.

My mother didn’t really understand the end of my speech, but, satisfied with the beginning, she embraced me tenderly for the first time in my life.

“Thank you, dear Marie,” she said. “I am pleased with your choice – it is in line with my long-standing hopes and wishes.

I am going to give your answer to our beloved Count.” As soon as she had left, I unsealed the letter in my hand mechanically.

Through my tears and sobs, I made out these words that my tears washed away, while they were burned into my memory forever.

“The fatal ‘never’ could not have come from your heart, and yet it resonates painfully in mine. Oh, take back such a heart-rending sentence.

Let me penetrate you with the deep feelings you inspire in me. Because if after having felt such a powerful, imperious attraction, for which I was searching the world in vain, it has slipped between my fingers, just when I burn to surrender to it.

Marie! You will answer to God for my despair. Impose laws, and I will submit to them blindly. My homeland, fortune and future for your heart and your hand is a very sweet trade.”

Souvarov.



Tired from feeling, exhausted from painful emotions, frightened of the future which had just been decided irrevocably for me, I think that I lost my mind. I remember nothing anymore but a horrible headache and a feeling of suffocation. I was hit with a terrible fever then, and I hovered between life and death for three weeks.

As soon as I was able to disentangle my ideas from the terrible delirium that kept them shackled, I noticed Count de Walewski at my bedside.

"My dear Marie," said my mother, "Do you see our dear Count, who hasn't left your street since you have been in danger. He brought all the doctors from Warsaw to save you. He destroyed all of his beautiful horses with the effort of sending parcels to you. Oh, if it weren't for him, I would have lost my mind!"

As my mother spoke and my head cleared, the memory of the past returned, with the lamented image and that the sight of Count de Walewski naturally reproduced. What did he say? What has he done? His despair! Good God! Change the dreadful tragedy that will weigh overwhelmingly on the rest of my life. And the fever returned, along with its ghosts and its delirium.

So for three months I fought against a physical illness that my mind, with a single thought, threatened to turn into depression. In the end, in a moment of weakness, I dared to ask Count de Walewski for news of his friend.

"My dear Marie," he responded, "We will discuss this when you have regained your strength. All you need to know is that I turned him away as you wished and that he left immediately for St Petersburg." I was not satisfied with this response, but I had to content myself with it.

I came back to life, but with regret. I was surprised that a ray of happiness, barely noticeable, vanishing immediately, was able to make my existence fade, to break my heart so profoundly.

This state of mind gave way to passive and apathetic indifference. I gave no more thought to dodging the marriage, which scared me. I was indifferent to everything. I ended up even preferring this resolution to any other. I devoted myself to my family, and the Count's age gave me hope that compared with another, younger man he would be less demanding that I have feelings that I thought I was no longer capable of feeling and giving.

However, I must be fair to Count de Walewski, who saw me so devastated and so sad a few days before our wedding date.

He asked me with concern the reason for my sadness and this languor, which penetrated me.

"My dear Marie, you know that I offered you a man who was charming in all respects, with all the advantages one could desire. I only offered myself after him. I couldn't believe you were sincere in your objections to such a charming Russian. The despair of this interesting young man even caused me a great deal of pain. I had to make him believe that an unfortunate passion of which your mother disapproved was the reason you refused.

This confession stopped him from persisting in pursuing you and made up his mind quickly. Because, in the end, he was destined for a more brilliant, more pleasant career than going to fight the Persians, where he would get himself killed! You accepted my wishes voluntarily; your mother even assured me that when she allowed you to choose one of us yourself, you

chose me, with no influence from her. I know that I am no longer young enough to inspire you to love me, but give me your friendship, your trust, and rest assured that you will never have a truer friend, who is more ready to make any sacrifice to ensure your happiness. Say the word and I will leave, if you find me so odious." "Oh," I thought, "And this other made a sacrifice also! Here he is, banished to another hemisphere, his career disrupted and a shadow over his future because of me!"

My... I have to fulfill mine! And I gave the Count my hand, telling him that since he was reasonable enough to require only my friendship and my respect, I would keep my promise, certain to not make him regret the trust he had in me. Oh! This promise was foolhardy!

I am jumping ahead in time, to my wedding day. Finally, this terrible day was over, like those before it.

I was dressed and adorned. I was taken to the altar. My hand was raised and placed between the hands of he who was acquiring them. I knew not what I was doing nor what I was thinking, nor even what was happening around me then.

This period of my life passed like a fantastical, ethereal picture, the sole memory of which is hazy.

Three years passed in this way. My mother was delighted at having reached the goal on which she had set her heart for many years. The Count was delighted to set up a young wife in his beautiful chateau, like one more ornament to present to his neighbors. And I was still listless, sad, apathetic, resigned to prayer and my religious exercises!

I became a mother! My life was not only resuscitated, but it was taken over by this other beloved being. Nothing personal slipped into what I was feeling anymore. It seemed like I had stopped living my life for myself and that my son revived it.

My waning – but not destroyed – patriotic ideas awakened stronger than ever. Because of him, I no longer dared to think about the painful sacrifice that I had made for them.

Far from it: I was proud of and satisfied with this victory...

So I devoted even more energy to anything that had to do with my country! Did I not have a Polish son?

At the time, the conqueror of Europe ruled the world and monarchs alike! He did with nations as he liked, elevating new dynasties and lowering old ones! What a time! More propitious for our hopes! Accordingly, the excitement was widespread!

Demanding our rights, our national independence, casting off shameful, oppressive and illegitimate shackles in which three united powers held us!  
This universal wish, filtering down from the upper class to the people, made spirits soar.

Ready to exchange our hope for reality, we thought the rebirth of our beloved homeland was included in the main clause of every treaty signed by the victor!

For a long time, our youth, eager for glory, had looked for it and found it beneath its flags!

France became the adoptive homeland of outlaws as well as that of all the noble and worthy sons of the motherland. They would fight over the love of their families, the native soil! Their very fortunes, gold chains that were given to them, to go and study the art of war, under the most famous warrior! And to acquire with brilliant courage, and complete devotion, the rights to support one fine day! But in this voluntary exile, they had no wish, did not sigh, harbored no hope that was not aimed at the motherland! It was this hope for a better future for the motherland that sustained their efforts, prevented them from being discouraged, and created the universal bond – always aiming at the same goal!

The liberation of the homeland!

Felt by the same suffering, torn by the same regret! In memory of their country, some of them wore on their chests, as a sacred relic, small bags filled with native soil, from which only death would part them, and which were found clutched to their heart when their bodies were collected after battles! Oh! In this image of a dying person was a final loving embrace for a mother, a wife, a dear friend, trampling this sacred soil for which he had sacrificed his life and his affections.

Brilliant deeds had drawn people's attention in general, and especially that of the judge *par excellence* of heroic war deeds! The Polish legions were at the height of military glory!

Could there be any doubt that such powerful help to strike down the enemies of a great nation to share the dangers, to embrace its cause with zeal, would remain unrewarded?

Was it presumptuous? This hope based on the brotherhood of arms, trained at the same school, braving the death of courageous men and prizes of glory together? True sons of the homeland, the more it was oppressed and miserable, the more they exerted themselves, wanting to amass the obligations of the only power capable of restoring this captive motherland to its rightful position.

I shared these sentiments of affection for my native land more than anyone, especially since I was mother to a son! I felt penetrated by a patriotic elation – it was all I cared about and gave me my life back. Eager for news, I devoured the newspapers. Sharing this strong interest, the Count suggested a trip to Warsaw to be closer to the interesting events that were anticipated, according to all the political probabilities and circumstances of the time.

Napoleon! This man with an iron fist only had to wish it to conquer the world.

So, after humiliating Austria, laying waste to Prussia, enlarging Bavaria, Westphalia, and Saxony, etc., he was finally going to attend to the destinies of Poland.

We thought that his arrival, awaited passionately in the capital, would be the end of all our suffering!

The impassioned enthusiasm that he inspired gave even more luster to the halo of glory that surrounded him in our eyes!

And who could be so unjust as to blame this admiration of an oppressed nation, which had hope only in him? Which already owed him the immortal glory of its national cohorts, and the only hopes for the future! He humiliated its enemies! He avenged it, had the right to its affection.

The feeling of honor for a foreign yoke! Is not the fact of being conquered through force common to everyone everywhere? I was delighted to accept the offer to go to Warsaw. We arrived in late September 1806. The Count acquired a townhouse and established his residence in keeping with his fortune, with the intention of introducing me to society and receiving people there.

At the time, Warsaw society had various echelons, as did every big city, with this distinction, however: everywhere else, the nationality of one's native language, customs, forms and frame of mind did not detract from elegance, from what is referred to in society as good taste, supreme good form. In Poland, however, it was a cachet of social prescription for the young people. In order to appear worthy of being introduced, of associating with high society, one had to adopt a foreign appearance, language and manners. One had to shed one's natural inclinations and adopt exotic colors, immersing one's spirit therein.

While French education was generally adopted in our boarding schools, it was a false, superficial veneer, that was dull, often even ridiculous, compared with the brilliance that came from one's travels, social groups and reading exclusively in French.

So as a result of this state of affairs, despite equal birth, fortune, rank, and often even family ties, those ladies who were unable to go and find the wit, grace and fashion of Paris, or give their daughters French governesses, were reduced to creating a separate, very distinct society, called "provincial society" by the members of high society.

It would be desirable for the happiness of mankind that only morality received the distinctions and successes in vogue. But this human weakness is almost universal and can be healed only if virtue were to be in fashion one day.

To justify this antinational taste, it should also be added that the upheavals of our unfortunate country, this fatal division had undermined the foundations of our institutions, stopped the march of progress, paralyzed all efforts.

The century was marching on in France; it had stopped at our door, struck by the public upheaval.

The studies of a young man in 1790 had barely started when, at the call of the homeland, they were abandoned. Such young men joined the legions, to the place on the globe that held the only scraps of hope that we could reasonably form, depriving us of the light of those who could have reached it, restoring it to us.

In addition, contrary to intellectual progress, the oppressive power banished them. In the meantime, women were better groomed, educated continuously, with their faculties constantly and progressively developed, by the light of foreign luminaries, for the lack of any national flame! They were for the most part educated, appreciating the arts, cultivating them passionately, drawing constantly on nourishment which had become indispensable to their brilliant, lively imagination, from the treasures of this rich and fertile French literature! This also explains the social superiority given everywhere to Polish women, compared with the men of this country, and the dominant taste, exclusive to those for the sources from which they drew the beneficial effects of the Enlightenment, as well as the successes that they obtained therefrom.

Our innate preference for France molded us into French ladies; our instinct for imitation has always led us to this nation. Paris was and always will be the lantern that lights our way, the scent that perfumes us, the bell that cheers us up, and this precipice covered in flowers that leads us.

All of the social revolutions carried out in France have traversed other nations, to reach us and subject Polish society to the same chances, as blood circulates in the same body; good and evil flow to us from the same source, despite the combined efforts of oppressive powers! This preference, this attraction will always exist and will continue to fuel our hope for a future – obtained through its help!

This summer, I saw many people upon my arrival in the capital. Let us now turn our attention to the most memorable members comprising the social body, dominating all others, starting with our Prince Poniatowski, our Polish Bayard, whose least quality was his royal relations. Merit, honor, worthy and noble sentiments, popularity, affability, passionate patriotism – all of these qualities prevented one from noticing those qualities that he did not have. There he was, like a protective pillar around which gathered all of the leading social groups, comprising his family and many friends, his sister, Countess de Jyszkiewicz, boasting a very French wit and taste, doing justice to his drawing room, along with her friend, Countess de Vauban, who was originally from France. There was Madame LL..., a combination of all charms together in a ravishing beauty, charming by the graceful, elegant magic of each movement she made. Her every step, gaze, smile and appearance spread around her, serving as a model, like Raphael's beautiful Madonna or Sainte Cécile de... – to the despair of copyists, who, despite their efforts, were unable to reproduce them in their original beauty, holding, with the advantage of a historic name and a vast fortune, a scented scepter in hand and sparkling fashionably. After being admired by much of Europe during her travels, national self-esteem was satisfied with the great successes she obtained there, and despite her rather cold reserve (which people complained about quietly), people set their sights even more on the favor of being received at her home. She made it difficult to receive this distinction, which had to be earned through personal advantages, being very accustomed to society and especially foreign society.

In order to appear in the Princess A. Potocka's very Parisian circle, which was then called the 'court of wit', one had to have energy, presumption, a biting wit, to deflect the sallies launched sometimes to deploy her own entire range, and where the fear of being ridiculed could make a prepared mind lose its composure, by knocking down, and the desire to shine. But in exchange, those who had submitted to the tests, found among the pleasures a good school to form one's wit, taste, to develop intelligence, to mold forms and become fashionable!

But for a few omissions, these are the characters – all remarkable through birth or fortune and through the advantages of a foreign education – that comprised Warsaw's high society.

Almost all of the ladies possessed all the charms, knowing everything except their native language!

The second social echelon merged with the first, with beauty as the connection, thanks to the pretty ladies and young ladies shining with appeal, frame of mind, manners, the trilling

Parisian vernacular, despite the contrast with their mothers, who didn't understand their foreign language.

Next came the venerable ladies, remnants of an ancient race, relics of those old days of warm, honest hospitality, whose golden doors would open immediately for you! Where free-flowing abundance allowed for four copious meals a day, of which all who crossed their thresholds could partake, despite a few disapproving regrets and murmurs against the mania of the fashion and innovations so opposed to the nationality, which they supported so firmly.

All social varieties met and were welcomed with kindness, indulgence and friendliness. The elegant social groups may have made only appearances, because the pleasure they could find there was out of fashion. Nevertheless, under the protection of charity and the noble generosity of a pure and strong patriotism, as well as all the ensuing virtues, malignancy never threatened this so justifiably deserved public respect.

Different cliques or circles, more or less elevated, in accordance with their means of fortune and education in step with the time period, formed a very extensive variety of social groups, which, although separated for the most part by the diverse tastes, habits and type, were nevertheless linked by a unanimous feeling of love of one's country.

Placed by my family ties as well as by a boarding school education in the less brilliant circle in terms of foreignness, I did not aspire to social heights.

I had a premonition about the difficulties and distaste that I would have encountered. I did not count enough on my abilities, although before my son was born, sensing a difficult world around me, a moral despondency, an invincible apathy, I tried to shift and occupy my thoughts by reading French books from the chateau's library. I even ended up liking this remedy: it developed my faculties and broadened my knowledge, but you only acquire language through use, and I knew that one mispronounced French word, one wrong liaison, one forgotten particle was an irresistible crime, a license for ridicule. This fear alone was enough to paralyze any desire I had to expose myself to the dreaded danger, keeping me in my national circle.

The studies of foreign minds made me tremble with dread and heightened my natural shyness.

The Count sharply disapproved of my resolve, conveying to me that my marriage to him gave me the right to this social supremacy and that remaining in the second echelon when one could be in the first echelon broke with custom. I was therefore forced to take part in introductory visits, but I will stop here...

Rumors of the Emperor Napoleon's arrival were growing constantly, with everybody's attention directed towards the great man and the political crisis, which we hoped he would settle favorably for Poland. Everywhere, the patriotism of the population was preparing a reception that could touch his heart.

Everyone awaited this much-desired arrival with an explosion of joy, triumph and noble pride.

I was apparently more tormented than the others by this frenzied impatience, because I was devising an ill-considered plan. I went with one of my cousins to meet him, if only to catch a glimpse of him!

This imprudence changed my destiny and deprived me of my peace. I believed all along that I was taking the most commendable action.

Dressed simply in a black hat with a black veil, we quickly climbed secretly into a coach harnessed to four good horses, as the couriers announced that His Majesty was only one stage away from Blonie. I surrendered thoughtlessly to this enthusiasm, to this rapturous excitement that was felt by all. I was persuaded that every Polish citizen, man or woman, wanted to show their eagerness for the arrival of the man whom they already considered the Savior of our fatherland.

The road was overcrowded with troops, luggage, couriers. We nearly tipped over a few times. In spite of this, I urged the coachman to hurry. Questions never stopped.

“Is the Emperor far from here?” we kept asking. When we arrived at the post office in Blonie, there were great crowds and relay horses were standing ready. This meant that Napoleon’s arrival was imminent...

We got out of the carriage, positioning ourselves to have a good view of him in the direction which we assumed most likely. But two women alone, with no man to protect them! We were so surrounded by the crowd, who were as eager as we to see him, that it was impossible for us to get through.

Impatient and worn out, we were suffocating. In this desperate and dangerous situation, I feared I might miss the triumph which I valued so highly, as I heard the noise, the carriages, the shouts of the people greeting him. When there was a moment of silence, I cried out in distress! A moment afterward, I made out a French officer of high rank, before whom the crowd gave way!

I raised my hands towards him and shouted in French in a beseeching voice.

“Ah, Monsieur! Help us out of here and let me see him for just one moment!”

He grasped my hand, smiling, and led me to the door of the Emperor’s carriage. He introduced us, saying:

“Look, Sire! This lady has faced the dangers of the crowd for you!”

Napoleon took off his hat and leaned toward me and said something, which I could not understand, because I was too eager to express what I was feeling.

“Be welcome, a thousand times welcome to our land! Nothing that we can do will ever express strongly enough either our admiration for you personally or the pleasure we have in seeing you set foot on this land. We have been waiting for you to save us!”

I was in a sort of trance, allowing my feelings to explode into words! How in the world I could have done this, shy as I was, I do not know. I often think of this moment, and am unable to explain it and define the spontaneous strength to speak my thoughts!

Napoleon was looking at me closely. He took a bouquet, which was in the carriage, and gave it to me, saying, "Keep it as a pledge of my good intentions, I hope that we shall meet again in Warsaw and that I shall receive a thank-you from your beautiful lips!"

The important officer quickly returned to his seat next to the Emperor. The carriage rolled away rapidly, but the great man's hat kept on waving at me!

I stood motionless, looking at the carriage until it disappeared in the distance. I grasped the bouquet, shaken by a thousand new feelings! I thought, "Isn't this a dream? Did I see and talk to the great Napoleon, who answered me in such a flattering way for our hopes? And on and on... who gave me a souvenir, a pledge which was worth more to me than all the riches in the world."

My companion had to push me to bring me back to reality.

I wrapped my treasure carefully in a handkerchief of fine linen. We left, returning home late in the evening.

I went to bed exhausted but happy!

Warsaw was very excited, overcome with unanimous emotion! Nobody's heart could remain unmoved in the midst of such general enthusiasm. A spark of love, hope and national honor engulfed the entire population, all classes and ages united.

Little children were jumping with joy, all patriots by birth! When questioned – often by our enemy oppressors themselves – about the use of their little weapons, how many times have children responded without hesitation, despite the discomfiture of their parents: "To strike down the enemies of our homeland!"

Oh! I clasped my son in my arms with such tenderness and maternal pride! When I awoke! I made him carry his little sword as well; I taught him to wield it and to utter the name of Napoleon with the same faith! Oh, how happy we were then! We thought that his sole arrival had liberated our fatherland from foreign invasion forever and our hearts were beating with joy!

I learned that the Emperor had dined with Count J.B... who had invited the elite of the ladies of high society. Wonderfully beautiful and witty, they honored the country by displaying their radiant charm. As for me, satisfied to have done my patriotic duty ahead of all the others, and flattered to have received from him a precious promise and a token, I was modest enough to hide my triumph, enjoying it alone, in silence. But my companion acted quite differently, not keeping our secret. A few days later, I had hardly arisen one morning when I received a message from a very important gentleman, asking at what time he could call, as he intended to pay me a visit. Surprised by such an early request, I let him know I would receive him around noon. Indeed, he appeared at the appointed time and spoke in a most engaging and eager way. He said, "Madame, I have come to ask why you deprive us of the advantage of having our august guest admire one of the most beautiful flowers of our land. I say nothing of the pleasure that we would have had ourselves, seeing you up close."



“Our sole occupation should henceforth be to make pleasurable and enjoyable the stay of this great man, who holds all of our hopes in his hand. This is why I have come to beg you not to shy away but to accept an invitation to the ball I am giving at my home. I presume that you do not need to be introduced? We know everything, Madame!”

I was taken aback by his sly laughter... I blushed! I did not want to understand his allusion.

“Come, come! Do not act humble anymore. Do not hide your success. Its secret has been betrayed, and I will tell you how I came to know of your brilliant conquest. You must know that last Thursday, he dined at home of Count Stanislas Potocki. The Count had scattered around his table the most beautiful and clever ladies of our society. The great man was charming to all of them, but we noticed that his attention was most particularly directed towards the Princess C L... Delighted to have perceived what seemed a preference, we gave him the pleasure of seeing her at all future festivities that were given for him.

But imagine how surprised I was when Marshall Duroc, chatting casually with me yesterday morning, said, “One has to admit that your ladies are beautiful and remarkably superior!” Such charms combined with the most cultured minds. When the Emperor returned from Count Stanislas Potocki’s dinner, he said to me, “Didn’t you notice, Duroc, that the most beautiful flowers would have paled in comparison to this gathering of attractive ladies!” “But... he regrets not to have found the exquisite stranger from post office of Blonie! He still thinks about her!”

Imagine my surprise!

Immediately, a messenger arrived early in the morning, just after she had arisen, asking Marie at what time she could receive an important gentleman.

Surprised by such an early request, Marie replied that she would receive him around noon.

Indeed, Poniatowski himself, head of Poland’s transitional government, appeared at the appointed time and spoke in a most engaging and eager way. He said to Marie:

“Madame, I have come to ask why you deprive us of the advantage of having our august guest admire one of the most beautiful flowers of our land...

I say nothing of the pleasure that we would have had ourselves, seeing you up close.

Our sole occupation should henceforth be to make pleasurable and enjoyable the stay of this great man, who holds all of our hopes in his hand. This is why I have come to beg you not to shy away but to accept an invitation to the ball I am giving at my home.

I presume that you do not need to be introduced?

We know everything, Madame!”

I was taken aback by his sly laughter... I blushed! I did not want to understand his allusion.

Poniatowski continued, “Come, come! Do not act humble anymore. Do not hide your success. Its secret has been betrayed, and I will tell you how I came to know of your brilliant conquest.”

He explained to her how during a casual conversation the previous morning, Marshall Duroc revealed to him how “the Emperor still regrets not to have been able to find the exquisite stranger from the post office Blonie... about whom he still thinks!”

He continued, "Imagine my surprise at this information! I got all the details! Duroc told me about the meeting, drawing a portrait that is as pure, diaphanous and attractive as you are in person. His brush strokes were so accurate, I should have recognized you! And yet I was lost in a thousand guesses that kept me from the model!"

He added that His Majesty singled out the Princess C.L. because he found a few connections, a few similarities with this lovely stranger.

Not knowing how to orient my conjectures, I set off to explore the town and the *faubourgs*, luckily the *aide de camp* C, who turned out to be the cousin of your traveling companion, pointed me in the right direction and calmed my impatient curiosity! Come, Madame, I hope that you will agree to be one of us now, that you will no longer deprive our hero of your presence, allowing us to enjoy your successes!"

"Ah, that is not the type of success to which I aspire," responded Marie, while enthusiastically admiring the exploits of the man who, I hope, will be our savior, our avenger!

"After first expressing these feelings to him, I am leaving it for others to be worthy of the honor to please him and occupy him!"

"Other merits are no longer an option, Madame! Yours are preferred, so make use of all of your powers of seduction! I am begging you to take a page from Circe's book! Under the banner of patriotism, we will all follow you and, who knows, perhaps the sky will use you to achieve and hasten the goal which we all desire and hope for!

Perhaps one day you will include the opportunity you had to serve the Homeland in one of the lucky moments of your life! To influence its establishment!"

"Oh, my God... so much happiness is not in store for me," cried Marie.

Marie continued, "In this spontaneous acclamation was the sole idea of saving the homeland, of serving it, which I considered as a supreme happiness in which it seemed unreasonable for me to share. Because I dare to affirm it, I never had a personal thought to please him or acquire his heart. He occupied such an elevated place in my imagination that I saw him as an idol above all other humans rather than as a mortal – that's one of the reasons that made me set out on the rash path, and gave me the courage to speak to him with such audacity, which was really nothing but a fever of patriotic delirium, pure and simple!"

Barely had Marie taken leave of Poniatowski, than a delegation of the most important Polish government officials came, also to bombard her while showering her with compliments and flattery.

She was challenged to participate with all of the ladies who gathered to fete the august guest with dignity and to provide him with a pleasant distraction from his serious concerns. She was unable to decline the invitation to the ball. She was 18 and a half and yielded to the influence of these politicians, believing, nevertheless, that she was committing to nothing that would be detrimental to her duties.

And Marie continued with her memories: "And what's more, Count de Walewski, seeing in this very flattering attentiveness from the most distinguished persons nothing but public

approval of his choice, insisted more than anyone and called my fears and lack of proclivity for the pleasures of high society ridiculous shyness, because I was unaccustomed to them. Delighted with what he called my success and the resulting attention he was given, he wanted no expense spared for my outfits, which he wanted to be very bright. I prefer simple things. I wore a white satin dress, a gauze overcoat and a tiara of leaves to the second ball, which was the start of a new career of pain, distractions and regret.

All the ladies had already fulfilled the duty of being presented, and so I was allowed to attend the ball without being subjected to this etiquette alone, which would have increased my embarrassment. Determined not to dance, I hoped to go unnoticed in the crowd and avoid public scrutiny and even, perhaps, the attention that I feared... as much as I had solicited it in Blonie.

The Count hurried me in my preparations, and I went slower. He grew angry, grumbling, "We are running the risk of not finding the Emperor anymore (he said), who only makes appearances at these large gatherings."

I was led to the carriage that awaited me; a sad reflection retraced this past, in which the heart, quivering with great joy and childish impatience, believing nothing can ever be soon enough. I threw myself alongside my mother in the carriage, which was expected to carry me toward these so desirable unknown pleasures, and that I longed to taste. Ah, how differently I felt next to the Count. I was troubled by a sudden emotion, a vague but poignant fear.

My fate was decided by a ball. A memory full of regret and bitterness constricted my heart, along with this reminiscence, where, across the merry crowd dancing, with the sound of the lively, cheerful music, I felt the first sign of a broken heart!

Was it a premonition? I can't explain it, but, stepping out of the carriage and crossing the throng of people scattered throughout the various rooms all the way to the mistress of the house and the star being feted, I definitely dreaded a terrible danger.

Murmurs of flattery, received with pleasure by the Count, who guided me, the attentiveness, compliments and questions about my lateness were nothing but buzzing in my ears. I was blinded by the dazzling lights. I couldn't see or distinguish anyone. I was placed between two strangers. I sat down mechanically, but I did not have time to gather my wits.

Poniatowski stood behind a chair and the attacks started up again, although quietly, very cautiously, whispering in my ears.

"We have been waiting for you impatiently. We were happy to see you arrive. We are happy to have found you again. Your name has been repeated so many times, we know it by heart. Your husband has been scrutinized. We shrugged our shoulders, saying, 'Unfortunate victim'. And I have been ordered to ask you to dance."

"I don't dance; I have no desire to dance."

"It's an order, Madame, which you cannot escape."

An order! An order to dance!

“No, no, I am not a pirouette to be spun at will,” I said, laughing. “What? Do you rebel already?”

“Yes! I always rebel against injustice and unreasonable demands.”

“But for heaven’s sake, look up, come, look, he’s watching us, I beg you!”

“He can certainly watch us; I’m not moving. Go and tell him that I do not wish to dance.”

“But you must be joking, Madame, surely you do not wish to compromise me?”

“I am actually the one being comprised from your tenacious insistence.

Oh, leave me, for pity’s sake, everyone is looking at us.”

He was forced to move away, sorry not to have succeeded in his negotiation. I saw him go right over to Marshall Duroc and recount our discussion, which this latter reported straight away.

Soon there was a break from the dancing. People changed places and scattered into the other rooms.

The circle of ladies, dazzling in their finery, formed a round garland around the ballroom.

Napoleon, accompanied by Prince Poniatowski, walked through it, uttering words, sentences, which he intended to be pleasant for each lady, but which, for the most part, conveyed his preoccupation or distraction and had the opposite effect, often extremely embarrassing and unpleasant for those to whom they were addressed.

My heart beat with dread! He was only a few steps away from me now. He kept looking at me, making me tremble. The ladies next to me nudged me with their elbows to warn me that I had to stand up to receive his words.

My eyes were lowered, but I heard the sentence he said to me: “White against white is unsuitable, Madame,” and lower, “This is not the welcome I was expecting! Based on...” He stopped short. I stood there like a statue, without responding or raising my eyes. He remained a moment, watching me carefully, and then moved away.

He left the ball shortly thereafter and I felt relieved, as though a terrible weight of embarrassment, uneasiness and even shame had been lifted.

As soon as he had left, merriness and sheer gaiety, released from such serious respect, could be felt.

“What did he say to you?” everyone wanted to know. The answers gave rise to nervous laughter.

He had asked a young lady how many children he??? had. He asked another lady if her husband was jealous of her beauty. He asked a fat lady, who was almost monstrously stout, if she liked to dance. He told a divorced lady that the pleasure of a happy marriage was written on her face.

But what did he say to Madame de Walewska... because the response took longer than all the others and seemed like a speech. "Oh," cried both ladies next to me, Madame D. and Madame de K... "He told her gallantly that white should not be worn with white and then... His last word was to wait for me... I really don't believe you could have heard his last word, because I didn't hear it myself."

I escaped in the middle of the speculation driven by curiosity, and I was subjected to the same questions in the carriage. "I certainly noticed that he spent more time with you than with the others!"

Oh! If he had opened his eyes. If he had seen and understood the danger! If he had protected me by leaving swiftly! But far from that – he told me that he had accepted on my behalf an invitation to dine at the residence of Mr. B., where His Majesty would be.

He advised me to be sure to wear more brilliant finery, finding that what I wore to the ball was too simple, and bid me good night at the door to my apartment, before heading to his apartment. Just at that moment, I was almost tempted to confess to him all of my fears as well as the scruples of my conscience!

The vanity of men certainly prepares the fatal falls of women – fatal to them as well because of the repercussions on their honor and their peace of mind! And they reject us when we fall because of them!

Their lack of foresight held spellbound by their vanity places us on the brink of disaster.

Barely had I returned when my maid mysteriously gave me a note, whispering, "Your response is awaited! Madame, here is the first note!" Mr. M. said, opening an English wallet and presenting the document to me. The writing was indecipherable. The impatience and violence of desire appeared to have guided the quill used to hastily write the barely formed characters.

I sensed rather than read these words.

*First note*

I had eyes only for you. I admired you alone! I desire no one but you. A very prompt response is needed to cool Napoleon's impatient ardor.

I was outraged by the style and threw the note on the ground with disgust, petrified!

"But, Madame! Do you know who is waiting for you there in the street? It's the..."

"Ah! Too bad! Julie, run and tell him that there will be no response and that he should not wait for one."

Julie ran and returned, frightened to tell me that the important person was following her. I barely had the time to double-lock myself in, telling him through the door that I was just as resolved in terms of the response that he requested as I had been when I refused to dance. He remained at my door for a good half hour, continuing to ask, beg and even threaten me.

I stood firm and he left, furious. I fell to my knees, thanking God and begging for His help.

“Your strong hand, oh, my celestial Father,” I said, “has already saved me from a much greater danger. You will save me again this time, just like the past!”

I went to bed with this comforting thought. A peaceful slumber was the price of the courageous resolutions that drove me.

I thought then that all I had to do was pray to receive!

I believed that this divine power would protect me without me having to make any effort of my own to fight the danger. My heart had nothing to do with it, because I repeat, to me, Napoleon was just a gigantic statue representing a genius and national hope.

I invoked him, I adored him from afar, but I was afraid of him up close.

Barely had my eyes opened in the morning, when Julie gave me yet another note of the same style, written by the same hand as that of the previous evening.

“I will not open any more! I am putting it with the first one.” I wrapped everything up, and, without even any string or seal, I had the missive returned to the sender.

My door was open all morning long – it was a whirlwind! The Count came to urge me to put in an appearance in the drawing room, where a few of our nation’s most marked, distinguished experts had gathered.

He announced the visit of the great Marshall Duroc. “You absolutely must go and receive him,” he said, the radiant joy of pride making him look younger. He ingratiated himself with the marked intention of concealing my calculated reserve, of which he strongly disapproved, not understanding the real cause of it.

I complained that I felt faint, that I had a dreadful migraine! Never had I seen him so furious.

“You will overcome your migraine and receive the Marshall,” he retorted, beside himself.

Injustice has always made me bad-tempered, and I absolutely refused to leave my *chaise longue* and go to the drawing room.

The risqué and unsuitable tone of the first note left me feeling oppressed. I was indignant, irate and humiliated that my utterly patriotic impulse in Blonie had been so misunderstood, so wrongly interpreted.

I was even determined to excuse myself from the dinner (which held nothing but terrifying thoughts for me) to prove that people were mistaken in their judgment of me, to rectify it with completely opposite behavior, and to close off all access to offensive pursuits. But was I capable of that which I wanted? Alone against the world.

He left me, furious, and soon returned with people I was afraid to see, with the exception of the Marshall, who remained but a moment in the drawing room after having heard of my indisposition.

The man who had delivered the notes was there, giving me furious looks; the intention of the two others was no less marked.

I was embarrassed.

“You cannot refuse to receive the strongest supporters of our common cause, who absolutely wish to see you, Madame!” said the Count severely, ushering them in.

“Your presentation is essential, as the Grand Marshall has just stated, the etiquette of the court ordains it. Without it, you cannot be included in imperial society!”

At these words, I blushed and my embarrassment must have been visible. What role was being played, without suspecting he who should have kept me far away from shameful undertakings?

I was still trying to remain firm, complaining of my headache.

They all joined in, the oldest among them, a respectable family man staring at me and saying, in a severe, penetrating voice:

“In light of such high, such major considerations affecting an entire nation, everything must give way, Madame!

We hope that you will feel better by the dinner in question. You cannot get out of it without looking like an unworthy Polish woman!”

I was spared no specific allusions that were insinuated delicately, which the Count took to be general allusions.

All of their fiery patriotism was bursting from their male overtones! The dignity of their bearing, the expression of these enflamed souls, devoted to the sacred cause, to the love of the homeland passed to me.

Ah! It certainly is true that we lead a dual existence: on the one hand, our principles, our feelings of love of that which is good, penetrate us with benevolent, courageous resolutions. On the other hand, a secret voice warns us, diverts us from the evil released by an inner satisfaction, like solace after the sacrifice made, as painful as it may be.

External life dominates us in spite of ourselves and intertwines in dependency on evil. Once again, I was faced with this fight between my head and my heart, my duties as a wife, mother and Polish citizen that torment my life.

What did I have to say, when, after they had left, the Count said, “I left my countryside, Madame, to be present for the glorious rebirth of my homeland, to unite my efforts and my voice with all of those raised to this great man to that end. You shared the widespread enthusiasm! More than anyone else. You!

So impassioned! So enthusiastic! I do not recognize you any more; you were sullen at the ball, you didn’t want to dance; you turn down flattering invitations to these gatherings; you close your door to those whom I wish to attract.

All this displeases me, Madame. I do not want society to think of me as a jealous old man, and that is how you are making me appear. Moreover, I want to see my wife hold the position she deserves. Listen, I felt I was obligated to bring them to you, to convince them of the injustice of their suspicions!

For over an hour, I was the butt of their jokes. Me, jealous! Am I deserving of this wonderful opinion of jealousy?

Therefore, Madame, I want – I formally demand – you to be presented. I want you to seek out and respond to the attentiveness of all the ladies who make up high society. You can be successful with them only if you stop being so shy, by getting used to being in high society.

Get dressed and go to the Countess de Vauban, who will give you good advice on your finery and the etiquette of the Court. In the meantime, I'm going out." I lowered my head and murmured, "Thy will be done." I felt completely spineless.

Bearing a famous name, the Countess de Vauban had adorned the highest societies in Paris during the previous reign. The shock of the revolution had displaced her; a youthful memory that had not been erased, to which a feeling more tender than friendship clung, called her to Warsaw.

She was greeted with devotion and distinction.

She could be seen holding down the drawing room of Prince Joseph Poniatowski... with such spirit, such tone, such completely French mannerisms, imprinted with this social charm that was so appreciated by our country.

The brilliant sparks that she spread around her served as lures to some and lessons for others.

In a word, people aspired to this imprint of a French mold. A distinction from the Countess de Vauban was a license, proof of being good company, and, as a result, it opened every door.

In addition, the halo that encircled her friend in the eyes of all compatriots, protected the friend from the severe opinion that her position could trigger and was yet one more reason to amass compliments around her.

I was therefore going to see the Countess de Vauban... in accordance with the orders I had been given, and I admit openly that I was very flattered by the welcome she gave me.

Lacking confidence, this presence of arrogant wit, without which a person who is aware of being observed, is at ease only in customary social circles. The thought of the day after this public presentation frightened me. I was quite sure in advance that all eyes would be on me. That my natural shyness heightened by embarrassment would deprive me of the few means I could have to respond to comments, without being ridiculous, that this same society seized eagerly to turn its superiority against poor women from the provinces! I really needed the support of the Countess de Vauban as well as her protection; malice could affect me, but not ridicule.

I responded effusively and confidently to her engaging, friendly manners, wanting to ensure that I would have such a powerful guide for this dreadful debut. Reassured by her promises and protestations, I now only had to worry about getting dressed up and the etiquette to be observed, so that it was easy for me to cross, under her patronage combined with the ingratiating and unofficial activity of Mr. de Walewski.

This divorced, young, pretty, lively, scatterbrained, witty lady, afflicted with bad luck, took refuge under the protective wing of the Countess V., to whom she owed her assistance in gatherings in the drawing room. Shaped by society, by contact with the model that she had in front of her, Madame de Vauban acquired all the gifts needed to be found attractive; she was appealing, taking on the nationality with all the graces as Parisian strangeness, depending on her needs. She was well thought of by all, unofficial for all. The Count found her charming and, as much to court her as to help me become accustomed to society, he encouraged our acquaintance, which soon became intimate. Shy and serious, but affectionate by nature, I lost myself in the charm of a completely comfortable friendship, that did all the work, took all



the steps to win over my heart and my trust well before I could suspect a motive unrelated to the sympathy that I presumed was the true asset of our relationship.

She was too perceptive to have missed that which I wanted so badly to hide. Her impassioned patriotism attracted mine instead of suppressing it.

"Everything," she said, "Everything for the sacred cause!"

She possessed me, becoming my shadow. I had left her but 15 minutes earlier, when she arrived, all agitated, throwing a fit about the returned notes, which she held in her hand, with an additional long letter. "No, no," she said, "You will not behave this way. You will realize the hope we have in you. Do you think that letters can be returned to he who wrote them? Who would dare do such a thing? My dear, you are ruining us!"

Here, read this other letter. First of all, an entire nation is raising its voice to you, because it is written by its representatives."

And here is the letter.

"Madame! Small causes often have great effects! Women have always had a great deal of influence on world politics. Modern times and the most ancient times alike ensure us of this truth – men are so dominated by their passions! You will, Madame, be one of the most tremendous powers.

Men! You would have given your life for the worthy and righteous cause of the homeland! Woman! You cannot serve it against your will; your nature is opposed to this, but there are also other sacrifices that you can certainly make and that you should make, even though they would be difficult!

Do you think that Esther gave herself to Pyrrhus out of love? Was not the terror that he inspired in her, making her break down at his mere gaze, proof that affection had no place in this marriage?

She sacrificed herself to save her nation and she had the glory of doing so.

Could we say as much for your glory and our happiness!

Are you not a daughter, mother, sister and wife of zealous Polish citizens? Who, with us, all form the national body, the strength of which can be increased only by the number and unity of the members who compose it.

But know, Madame, what a famous man, a saint and a pious cleric – Fénelon – said:

Men who hold all the authority in public cannot establish any effective tie through their declaration if the women do not help them execute it.

Listen to this voice, joined with ours, Madame, to bring about the happiness of 20 million men!"

"Let's see now," said Madame de Vauban, pushing away the lovely letter. She read Napoleon's second note.

Did you not find me to your liking, Madame? Nevertheless, I was entitled to hope the contrary. Was I mistaken? Your eagerness has abated, whereas mine is increasing. You are interfering with my rest! Oh! Give a bit of joy, happiness to a poor heart that is ready to adore you. Is it so difficult to get a response? You owe me two!

"Hurry, hurry, I'm going to answer for you." "Be careful," I said, "or I won't go out tomorrow."

The Count interrupted our discussion, followed by a series of visitors: nothing but noise, enthusiasm and encouragement, jolting my thoughts.

The evening dragged well into night; my shadow spent it with me.

I noticed then that my nights, when I surrendered to myself, always made the voice of truth resonate more loudly than all the others surrounding me, suffocating me during the day.

They were spent making the wisest resolutions that the general opposition crushed and prevented me from executing.

Besides, my conscience also focused on what do I have to fear? I don't love him.

And the following day, when Mr. C, my relative's cousin, giving me his arm to step out of the carriage, said to me, "They're waiting for you; you will outshine all the beauties gathered there! To you alone will remain the triumph of such a glorious conquest! Please don't forget me; I am the first who stated your victory."

These words hurt me. Oh! I still embraced the purity of the feeling of intimate modesty, which rejects unvirtuous allusions!

I always promised myself to never follow anyone's banner other than my own, and, although I had very little presumption in terms of my face and my mind, I did with regard to my moral behavior. Had I not already been brilliantly victorious in the face of a first love? Had I not suppressed this romantic tension that is so commanding in a woman in the springtime of her life?

Therefore, I thought I possessed the same type of strength that I had used in the past. But... I was forgetting... that I had not invoked the heavens and that I no longer had time to do so now. The torrent, noise and constant activity of a throng hanging on my every step left me no time to think.

Madame de K. was waiting for me and opened her arms to me the moment she saw me!

"Ah! Come in, come in! I had a terrible fear," she said. "I was afraid I would never see you arrive. That would have been a terrible setback!

But here you are, finally! And so beautiful! Ravishingly radiant and fresh! I hope that you will learn from your successes."

Moving into the drawing rooms, she left me with Madame de M... who was to present me.

The gathering was not large, but the attendees had been carefully selected.

I was shaking; luckily there was no time for any unkind comments, as the Emperor was arriving! There was a general murmuring at his arrival; we all stood.

Moving towards our circle in keeping with custom, he seemed better prepared than the first time in distributing his sentences. When my turn came, after I had been named, to everyone's great surprise and to my great joy, I was asked only a very dry question.

"I thought that Madame was unwell. Has she fully recovered?" was all he asked me.

I raised my gaze to him. He confessed later that he saw therein an expression of approval of his delicacy.

At dinner, I was placed almost opposite His Majesty, between Marshall Duroc and the Count de K.

He began the conversation with history-related questions, which the Count Stanislas Potocki answered very knowledgeably. The Bactory, Sigismond Auguste and Sobieski centuries were reviewed.

I was feeling more comfortable and yet I met his unwavering gaze, which was in curious contrast with the seriousness of the subject he was discussing.

The Marshall attended to me during the entire meal. You can certainly imagine that with my embarrassment, I had no appetite at all. However, I dared not refuse the dishes that were presented to me, although I barely touched them. He also took advantage of the opportunity to speak to me quietly on behalf of his master, with whom he seemed to communicate via reciprocated glances.

After many reproaches and delicate allusions, he insisted to know the reason that had cooled this passion demonstrated so strongly in Blonie and why I ended up being one of the last ladies to be presented to him! Was it a jealous husband who caused my sorrows?

"You are quite mistaken, Marshall, Mr. de Walewski does not possess this particular fault. He shares in the general enthusiasm, considering the Emperor to be a savior, a benefactor, who is granting the wishes of his family to improve his lot.

I wanted to be one of the first to pay tribute to him, but that was the sole honor that I had set my sights on!"

"Judging by the impression that you made, yours was the only one heard, Madame! And he thinks only of you..."

"Ah! Marshall, I am a mother! And it is in the interest of my son and his homeland that I wish to be heard."

"Success depends perhaps on you alone, Madame. Ask and you shall receive, it has been said, and you reject him!"

During this dialogue, the august person across from me, following the general conversation in which he appeared to take an active part, did not lose track of our conversation.

I noticed gestures similar to sign language, dictating the words that my neighbor passed on to me.

At one sign from his imperial hand, which he held on the left side of his buttonhole, the telegraph seemed embarrassed, hesitating a few moments! And then, as though he were sure that he had guessed the meaning of the gesture, he said, "Ah! What about the bouquet"

What did you do with it?" "It is too precious to risk seeing a single leaf fall off and die. It is a legacy that I am keeping for my son."

"Ah! Madame! Deign to allow us to offer you one that is more worthy of you."

"I only like flowers!" I hastened to respond, quite loudly, blushing as though to ward off a disgraceful allusion. The Marshall looked at me with surprise! "Well," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "We will pick laurel from your native soil for you."

"Ah! If it were true! Ah, Marshall, a homeland is the bouquet to which we all aspire!" And that's how the entire dinner went.

We moved back into the drawing rooms, where His Majesty took advantage of the confusion of the moment to approach me. When he wanted his gaze to be penetrating, he had fire in his eyes, into which it was impossible to look without lowering your own.

That was the impression he had on me, taking my hand and squeezing it hard, saying quietly,

"No, no, with such soft, tender eyes, with the expression of kindness, you let yourself be swayed, you don't enjoy torturing, or else you are the biggest flirt, the most cruel woman!"

He left like a shot after this witticism, followed by all the men.

The curiosity of the few ladies who remained near me, exchanging malicious glances, suggestive smiles and subtle jokes, was piqued. As often happens in life, when one wishes to avoid a small embarrassment, one winds up with a bigger one. I followed my friend, Madame de Vauban, with pleasure, when she asked me to accompany her to Madame P... who wished to speak with me. The circle in which I found myself had only insiders, but as soon as I arrived, I understood what I was in for. People started by strewing flowers in front of me, concealing with such dexterity the precipice that they were covering. People talked about such attractive results, I was given such imposing duties, that I should have upset the political arrangements that were highly advantageous to my country by breaking the silence and going against their decisions.

"He only has eyes for you! He showed his passion for you!"

"It was visible; you alone can convey the voices of an entire nation, influence destinies... and you hesitate?"

"Was it scruples?"

"Ah! They won't affect you! Through so many benefits resulting from your sacrifice, if there may be one! A purer, cloudless sky will sparkle above your head You will proudly and joyfully set foot on the land of your ancestors, consecrated by their merit, covered in their blood, because you will have helped to free it from a shameful yoke, to place it once again where it belongs, to assert the happiness and independence of 20 million men! And your son will have a homeland! Sacrifices do not matter if they obtain such results!"

I listened! I was dazzled by the prestigious words that heightened my patriotism.

The seduction was starting to work; I was ready to assert their opinions! To think of myself as an instrument of divine will, placed in a position to accomplish it. No other voice could be heard at the moment. I was all wrapped up in the prestige!

I do think that the sudden entrance of the Marshall had been planned and expected, because soon, only three of us remained. Appearing next to me, he placed a letter on my lap, took my hand in his, and said to me, imploringly, "Madame, could you refuse the request of he who has never been refused before?"

"Ah! His glory is surrounded with sadness and he depends on you to replace it with a moment of happiness!"

I was choked with shame and covered my face with my hands! I could have been killed and I wouldn't have been able to say a word or look at him.

"Your silence means yes! Yes, Marshall, assure His Majesty that the pretty, as yet untamed bird will be there soon! As he wishes!"

"For heaven's sake! What are you saying?" I cried, finding my tongue again. "What you yourself should be saying: I am a better Polish woman and I readily believe, like all intelligent minds, devoted to their country, that we couldn't do enough for Napoleon!"

"Open this letter, Madame, I beg you!" said the Marshall. "I hope that after you read it, you will be more favorable to him. He will return for your response." He left, and Madame de Vauban hastened to read the following:

*Third note*

There are times when too much elevation is a heavy burden and that is how I feel. How can I satisfy the imperial need of a smitten heart, which would like to throw itself at your feet and finds itself stopped by the weight of lofty considerations, paralyzing the sharpest of desires! Oh, if you would!

You are the only one who can remove these obstacles that separate us! My friend, Duroc, will make this task easier for you!

Ah! Come, come, all of your wishes will be my command! I will be more devoted to your homeland! When you take pity on my poor heart.

Napoleon

"Ah! Would you have the impudence to refuse after this apostil this time! Listen! I have lived in the Court and I know that beauty has always been able to make its way easily to the sovereign and influence him. Almost every page of history proves this.

I love your Poland heart and soul; it's my adopted homeland! I am connected to it in so many ways, but the only salvation I see for it lies in this extraordinary man, who is charged with settling the fate of the French as well as that of Europe.

I thus must not disregard any means to achieve this interest to gain access thereto. So get a good idea of these truths and may any other consideration cease in the face of a major cause."

"Madame," I responded, dissolving into tears, "I cannot be angry with you; you all want to sacrifice me for the good of the homeland. I would give my life without hesitation for this sacred cause – I am ready to make all the sacrifices necessary!"

But the future terrifies me. What will become of me if I renounce the principles that have guided my life? And who knows if I will be able to do the good you are hoping for? Napoleon is not a Henri IV, Louis XIV or Louis XV and my means for being witty and for plotting do not match those of all these contemptible women who dominated them.”

“As for the means,” replied Madame de Vauban, “You will have them – simply take the advice of the homeland’s zealous supporters!

As for your contempt of the famous women who helped shine with lasting brilliance over these centuries, who are still admired by the entire world, you are the only one to judge them so severely. These are vile principles of provincial education that you will understand later to be madness. Do you believe that the position you are being offered is not aspired to here?

Ah! Believe me, hurry up and respond favorably, because it can slip between your fingers!

Why have doubts about the good that you can bring about? Don’t you know that such a sovereign, believing he is only offering his heart, has often laid his crown at the feet of the beauty who was able to ignite his passion?

Any emperor whatsoever! He’s a man, and nothing more!”

“Well,” I said, “Do with me what you will!”

“Ah, good, you’re finally being sensible! So you wish to respond accordingly?”

And she was already getting ready to give me the means, choosing from her most beautiful pieces of satiny paper. “I will never have the strength to write that; use me; arrange the consummation of the sacrifice for which you have all condemned me, but do not force me to write or say a single word on this matter.”

“You really are unbelievable. But what can you do? You really need to get over these idiosyncrasies. Well, wait, we need to make other decisions.” And, after locking me in, she left the study.

At that moment, I had a thought, like a will-o’-the-wisp in the midst of darkness, or like a plank at sea for a dying survivor of a shipwreck, who calculates only the present danger and not how far it is to the distance shore. I believed in a fantasy at my age! But I thought I had seized my plank, so I hoped to escape danger by braving it!

Could I not agree to secret meetings, without weakening? Could I not gain his trust by inspiring respect and friendship in him? To make our wishes heard! To dare to insinuate that which others do not or cannot dare? To transmit these captivating patriotic voices that penetrate my soul!

Will his soul be insensitive to these males, to these energetic accents! Would it stoop to demand, to use violence to conquer the resistance of a woman, who wants to remain pure and has no love to give him, but who has much admiration, enthusiasm and friendship?

Yes! I will be honest and true! I will tell him everything I said to him in Blonie!

I will be his friend, heart and soul!

I would offer him a tribute to this peaceful affection, without fervor, without emotion, without distractions, with the esteem and friendship devoid of any personal interest. And when he no longer loves me, he will still think highly of me! This is the dream I was developing, when I

should have been lifting my soul and my arms to he who is capable of anything, crying, "Save me from this moment!"

Madame de Vauban returned. "Here is the decision of our council," she said, "Which fits in with your wishes. You will no longer write, you will no longer speak, as you do not wish to do, but you will spend the rest of the day at my home... and this evening, you will be taken to your destination, to carry out a very important mission on which the salvation of your homeland depends – do not forget this."

They did with me as they wished; I was just a machine that could be moved at will. I felt only the dread of waiting. Every noise frightened me! The movements of the clock, the hand... made me shudder. I anxiously watched the door that was going to open, I assumed, at the fatal time! Remaining silent, I dared not ask questions. Between ten and eleven, someone knocked. This was the signal. "Let's take this veiled hat, wrap yourself in this coat and follow me. Someone will be waiting for you at the corner. Everything has been arranged. Evening has been prepared to handle your extreme delicacy with care!"

I still have no idea how I made this journey. A carriage awaited me. A man wearing a coat and a round hat was holding the door open. I was lifted up and pushed to climb in. After taking in the step, the man positioned himself at my side. We left and arrived without exchanging a single word. It was, however, D..., which I learned afterward.

When it was time to get out, I was accompanied to the designated door, which was opened impatiently.

I was seated in a chair, into which I fell, sobbing, my handkerchief covering my eyes. Napoleon was at my knees, at my feet.

"You hate me; I inspire dread in you... You love someone more fortunate than me! Ah, tell me, tell me!"

Sobbing, my voice trembling, I dared to respond.

"No, that's not it. I'm ashamed of you. I'm ashamed of myself." "Dear angel! Can you be ashamed of a good deed? You bring me happiness, a moment of joy. Me, envied by all, do you think I'm happy? Do you think I'm wonderful, here, at your feet, begging for your love?"

This lovely little heart, which belongs, I'm sure, to another, because you cry so!

But it doesn't matter, I see your sweet face," and he pulled away the wet handkerchief that covered it.

"Sire, have pity on me!" "I was told that you were a bird that needed to be tamed, poor victim! And your elderly husband! How was he able to...?"

At this name, I jumped forward and cried out. I wanted to run away; my tears were choking me. A thousand sharp daggers stabbed me in the heart!

My crime was reflected in this remembered name and appeared to me in all the horror of the results!

Motionless, he looked at me probably with surprise. I ran to the door.

“So you really do hate me!  
I inspire horror in you! Ah! Heavens, how could a Polish woman hate you?”

“No! No! I admire you! I love you as the only one who can help us achieve our dearest hopes!

I proved it to you in Blonie! Your image has been with me ever since; my prayers to Heaven are for you. Ah! How can I be misunderstood?” And I started crying again.

“But... This name that you mentioned! It echoes here... at the bottom of my soul, like a feeling of remorse...” And I wrung my hands!

“You don’t hate me? That’s good,” he said, leading me back to the chair.

“Listen. Did you give yourself voluntarily to the man whose name you carry?” I didn’t answer.

“Did you agree to marry your fate to his for the love of wealth, titles, I don’t know what else... satisfied vanity?”

“Ah, good Lord. The love of wealth and titles! I have never felt that,” I replied. “But answer my questions. There has to be an extraordinary reason to match youth, beauty that has barely bloomed, with decrepit, almost octogenarian old age! If it were not for fortune and titles!

So answer me.” “My mother wished it,” I said, still crying. “Ah! I understand. And you could feel remorse?” “If that which was brought together on earth can only be separated in heaven!

The most powerful law-maker said so.”

He started to laugh! I became indignant. He confessed to me later that this scene amused him because of its novelty. “You know, if your face, your pure gaze, and these tears that flow like a fountain weren’t here to lend credence to your words, I would have thought you were a flirt, toying with me.”

He continued to ask me many questions about my primary education, my lifestyle in the country, my Christian name. At two o’clock, there was a knock at the door! “What, already?” he said.

“Well, my sweet and plaintive dove, dry your tears, go and rest, and fear the eagle no longer. The only power he has over you is that of a passionate love – but a love that wants your heart above all else. You will end up loving him, because he will be everything to you! Everything! Do you understand?”

He helped me wrap myself in my coat, which had come undone, and, leading me to the door, he stopped me again, placing his hand on the locked door latch, saying, “Promise me you’ll come back tomorrow, or I won’t let you leave. I have you and anyway, what do I care what people say? You are the dearest thing to me, the most desired conquest.”

“I promise.” Did I know what I was doing?

I was taken back the way I had come. But I was calmer, because, thanks to my fantasy, I was still hoping to reach the harbor with my little plank.



I will be braver next time, I will ask him, I will tell him... And I fell asleep, drooping from the emotions and fatigue of the day.

At nine o'clock, Madame de Vauban was already at my bedside, holding a large package, which she displayed mysteriously after first locking the door. Red morocco cases and greenhouse flowers with laurel branches appeared, along with a sealed letter. "Look at this first," she said, pulling a magnificent bouquet of diamonds from the case, and the garland! "What water, what game, what tasteful craftsmanship. Oh! How well it will suit you!"

And she arranged me, while I was beside myself with indignation! Snatching the objects she was admiring, I threw them on the ground to break them!

"What are you doing? Oh, heavens!" she cried, completely dismayed, and at the same time astounded to see me have this tantrum, of which she did not think me capable! "Know, Madame," I said, "That I think these jewels are horrible! Take them back immediately, I beg you! If I agreed to sacrifice myself, it would be for a price other than vain ornaments, which I scorn intensely." "Are you mad, my dear friend? I will return them – I will be careful! On the contrary, I am going to gather them up and save them from your fury."

But I was forgetting the letter! She unsealed it and we were able to read the following.

Thank you! My sweet Marie! My first thought is for you! My first desire is to see you again! You are coming back, aren't you? You promised that you would; otherwise, the eagle will fly to you! I will see you at dinner.

The friend tells you: deign to accept this bouquet, that it become a mysterious item that establishes a secret bond between us in the midst of the crowd that surrounds us, exposed to the gaze of the throng, we will be able to understand each other. When my hand clasps my heart, you will know that it is completely absorbed by you, and in response, you will touch your bouquet!

Love me, my sweet Marie, and may your hand never leave your bouquet.

Well! Where are you now, and what are you thinking? And so here is this beautiful bouquet, this mysterious item on which we based such wonderful hopes, dashed! Nevertheless, you must adorn yourself with it.

Ah, God help me, I already told you; it will never adorn me. My heart is in chaos! My imagination and my will can be led astray by elation, which dominates all of us, but the seeds and emotions of a sense of virtuous modesty are still there.

My forehead has not yet been made of bronze and I will never brag about the shame that you call my triumph. I will appear guilty, humiliated, but never triumphant!

However, I had to advance over the rocky road, bordered with precipices. I was driven by an invincible force. The same tone resonated in every head. All ambitions were simmering!

It was a boisterous swarm, bustling about, buzzing so that you couldn't hear each other, showing enthusiasm, mutually.

From my family to the one who should have seen clearly! Everyone shared the same intoxication.

I got ready in haste.

As etiquette did not allow for a bouquet at one's side other than at a ball, I went without it, even the green laurel leaves, although they symbolized hope for me.

My entrance at the home of M... caused a sensation. People were pressing around me, examining me with curiosity. I didn't know most of the people, and yet I thought I saw that they were all reading my visit of the previous evening on my face.

While complying with the customary formalities to the mistress of the house and the ladies who ranked higher than me, His Majesty was looking at me, knitting his eyebrows together, a sudden displeasure altering his features...

With a piercing and searching gaze, he looked me up and down, moving forward suddenly. It was agony.

I was terrified of a public scene. To avoid one, I placed my hand where the bouquet would be, in a sign of peace.

I saw him soften, his hand responding to the signal. I was shaking.

When it was time to move to the table, he called Duroc and said something in his ear. Placed like the first time, I would be bombarded with reproaches as soon as he was able to do so. "I understand," I responded as quietly as possible, "That after the glimpse you had of me, you would be surprised. I did not touch the case. It remained with the person to whom you gave it – I will not accept any gift of this sort! I don't want to have to tell you again, Marshall.

Ah! Would I dare to appear here adorned with such gifts!

Ah! Tell him that my devotion and strong admiration cannot be satisfied with personal rewards! A hope for our future! That's..."

"What? You continue to doubt! Hasn't he given it to you? Here, despite your unfairness, he is completely wrapped up in you! I understand his gaze! See, when he appears to be engaged in the general conversation, his hand placed on his heart indicates that the absence of the bouquet worries him. When he was seated at the table, he told me to remind you of the evening's promise! Ah, Madame, do not fail to keep it, if you intend to make him keep his."

"Ah! Surely you sense the full price of such a conquest and yet..." I dared to say to him.

"I find you completely different, much slower, compared with the passionate eagerness that you demonstrated with such energy in Blonie. And what surprises me even more! Seeing him more in love than I have ever seen him. The success aspired to everywhere – you are to be sent everywhere – is reserved for you, Madame. Ah! Cover the thorns of his life with flowers, because there are some cruel ones! People look at elevated positions with envy, unaware of the grief. I am too close to not see them, and my strong attachment to him is distressed. Accordingly, you see me in a hurry to help give him a few moments at least of elusive happiness."

What would I tell you? This second visit was filled with the same precautions as the first. He was agitated, anxious; his gaze was somber. "Ah! Here you are, at last! I no longer thought I would see you!"

He took my hat and coat from me and led me to a chair, saying, "So how will you justify the crimes I am charging you with?"

Why did you try to inspire in me the feeling that you do not share? Why did you refuse everything, even my laurels? What did you do with them?

I was associating so many interesting moments with them and you deprived me of them. My hand remained at my heart and yours remained motionless!

Only once did you respond to my signal. Oh, Marie! You don't love me! And yet I love you passionately! Where did this come from?" And he struck his forehead in a gesture of rage.

After a moment of silence that I dared not break: "That's Polish woman for you!"

"You strengthen my opinion about this country!"

I was again able to speak, crying,

"Ah! Please, Sire, tell me!" "Well, Marie, I consider this people to be passionate and light. I think that everything is done here on a whim and not systematically. Their enthusiasm is impetuous, turbulent and instantaneous, but they are not able to adjust it or perpetuate it. Is that not also a portrait of you? Beautiful Polish woman! Did you not run like a madwoman at the risk of being suffocated, to see me, to sow your seed in me?"

I let this heart be captivated by your tender gaze and passionate expressions, and then you disappear! I looked for you, but I didn't find you, and when you finally arrived, one of the last, I find you filled only with iciness, while I'm burning up! Listen, Marie! Know that whenever I have thought something was impossible or difficult to obtain, I desired it fervently! Nothing discourages me. Here, no one can keep up with me and I continue to advance! I am used to people yielding eagerly to my desires; your resistance captivates me, your charm has gone to my head, it's close to my heart!

I want.... Do you hear what I'm saying? I want to force you to love me! Marie! I brought the name of your homeland back to life. The Polish lineage exists thanks to me. I will do even more! But think also of this watch that I hold in my hands and that I am breaking in front of you."

Indeed, it shattered at my feet.

"And that is how its name will perish! Along with all your hopes, if you push me too far, by rejecting my heart and refusing me yours..."

I fell stiff at his feet, overcome with terror. He was in a state of horrible violence!

Let's draw the curtains on this scene that I would give my life to erase from the history of my existence.

You know that this extraordinary man is a volcano! He is dominated by passions and ambitions! But those of love are no less violent, albeit less enduring! He who saw the universe at his feet was there, at mine!

He dried my tears, which were falling drop by drop. The stars in the sky were falling! And me, dust, atom! Until a trust in divine inspirations turned against me.

I had so begged him to enlighten me as to the universal insinuations presenting me with such attractive results and that I was unable to define.

Were they criminal or not?

Why save my homeland from the yoke of foreign slavery? Must I sacrifice my soul for 20 million men?

Ah! If I had listened to none but the celestial voice that always said: You will do no wrong even in the hope of something good.

Human voices were my undoing! They told me: The Lord works miracles through a grain of sand.

And she was sobbing, her tears moistening her beautiful blond curls, which were flowing from the wet contact against her cheeks, neck, the purity and shine of which would have made the most beautiful paintings of the repentant Madeleine appear dull and lifeless.

He begged her to calm down.

“Ah! Let me cry! I feel better when my tears are flowing. I am overwhelmed with so many agonizing thoughts now; they are all coming back to me en masse. So many reproaches, I hear them here and here...” she said, indicating her head and her heart!

Ah, only now do I understand this admirable truth that says that when we use it in time, supreme wisdom has given us the strength to resist the torrent! A single step backward and we are saved!

But once taken, without any means – no more strength, no more possibility! And then everything is over. No more real joy, no more inner peace – everything withers, everything fades, all desires become dulled.

Only bitterness remains forever! Ah, I feel this bitterness, it is eating me alive – it’s a poison.

Poor women, how can I convince them all, that when men ask us for a moment of happiness, they give us an eternity of unhappiness in exchange?

I could no longer shrink back. I had to move forward on the rocky road paved by my mad elation. The sacrifice was complete.

It now entailed only reaping the fruit to not lose the only reward that could help me withstand such a guilty position. This is the thought that pierced me then, dominating my will; it prevented me from collapsing under the weight of remorse and regret.

Ah! Since then, I visited every day and my hopes remained the same, always met with promises for the future.

One evening he said to me, “Admit it, Marie, it is not me you love; it is the homeland that you love in me!”

“Yes, Sire, it’s true. I see the savior in you, he who will regenerate this homeland that is so dear to us. You are the idol to which thousands of voices and hands are raised! Invoking

your help with all the points of this unfortunate country, its entire population considers you to be the man who, with a single breath, a single will, can raise up this nation, humiliated for so many years, which has already tried unsuccessfully with its own might, but which can have no doubt with your help. All the hearts are yours! Can you doubt mine?

After making me forget everything! Everything! (and I cried) But regret and remorse will not get the better of me, if I get the sole reward worthy of you, worthy of me: the rebirth of my homeland. That's the fervently desired bouquet. It's the only gift, the only prize that I can accept without hesitation and that will enslave my heart forever. You promised me," I said, falling at his feet!

He lifted me up tenderly. "You can be sure, Marie, that I will keep the promise I made you.

You can already see that it has been partly accomplished! I forced Prussia to release the part it had usurped. Time will take care of the rest. This is not the time to complete everything; we must be patient. Politics is a string that breaks when you pull it too tightly, obviously, waiting for your statesmen to be formed! Because how many do you have?

You have many good patriots; you have manpower! Yes, I agree, I acknowledge this, the honor and courage exhibited in your brave men, but that is not enough to support my views, my efforts. You still need unanimity and many level heads." "Ah! Sire, we have that, they'll be found, have no doubt!"

"Yes, good! But what will become of your power then, ladies? Because when the men are idle, the women rule! If you put them back to work, watch out for your scepter!" (he said to me, patting my cheek).

This is how our evenings usually started, but our conversation was easily distracted by a trifle. He would even try to move away serious political ideas to focus on insignificant topics instead. He loved gossip, the salons, family life, secret anecdotes about society. He knew about everyone's private life; I was often surprised to hear details from him of which I myself was unaware concerning people in my circle.

"You certainly are discreet, Marie," he said a few times. "That's the secret of comedy and you want to make it a mystery." I would joke about this preference, saying that no one in the world would believe that the greatest man of his century, on whom the interests of the entire world rested, enjoyed such trifles!

"Nothing is beneath an observant man," he replied. "The study of men is the most important for me to know; I have achieved material milestones – the only way I can cross them now is by studying moral order. The customs of the great and the insignificant influence the morale of nations, seeking the cause of the disorder that weakened your country and undermined its foundation. I opened the golden doors of your palaces and your feast halls. I opened the drapes of your boudoirs and alcoves and that's where I learn the sources of the trouble.

Your citizens were raised from an overly personal greatness; you let them! They made those around them insignificant, who had perhaps done better than them. To cajole them, they were indulged, to prevent them from working and acting, enormous quantities of wine were poured down their throats, and in exchange for their voice, they were given money. The

family spirit of this completely personal wellbeing, had extinguished in great men the public virtues that had distinguished their ancestors and made them famous.

People whose dominant desire is to do nothing but eat and drink, imagining nothing: once you get soft, it's over, you must get intoxicated to not be distressed about being forced to do a little work."

"Ah, Sire, those days are over!" I said. "Unhappiness has revived my compatriots; they are aware of the mistakes of their fathers!

They are ready to make any sacrifice, to devote themselves completely!"

This would end with a pat on the cheek and a "My dear Marie! You are worthy of being a Spartan and having a homeland!"

One evening, he returned from a brilliant party, which Mr. C.M. had thrown for him. He was feeling unwell and asked for a cup of tea, which I brought him. "I eat too much here," he said, "Which I am not accustomed to doing. It makes me feel unwell. I must admit, Marie, that people really like to fete sovereigns in your homeland! I see that all of the knowledge and ideas applicable to life, the increase of social pleasures and the improvement of stately residences are introduced luxuriously and tastefully.

But my dear Marie! Don't be angry, don't pout, please, when I confess to you that while crossing your countryside and admiring your cities, the sumptuous homes, columns, porticos, vast parks, English gardens, Chinese pavilions, Greek and Roman temples, splendid boutiques and magical parties, I was struck unpleasantly by the extreme poverty of the masses, by all of your muddy towns, your wretched villages, these goat shacks and rags that cover an entire population. When my soldiers asked them for bread (*kleba*), they would say, *niema* (there isn't any). When they asked for *hoda* (water), they eagerly responded, *javaz, javaz* (ok, ok). As if they had nothing but water to give.

Marie, you must all base your hopes for solid success solely on the unanimous effects of the entire population covering this miserable country!"

"Ah, good Lord, Sire, what are you saying!" I became pale as death! I felt faint; I fell to the rug at his feet, as though he had struck me with lightning!

"Marie, you didn't let me finish my sentence! You didn't understand me, wake up, Marie, my dear Marie!" And he ran to fetch smelling salts, cologne, rubbing my forehead and pale temples!

"Sire, take back this horrible sentence or prediction. It's a death sentence for me and my homeland, because without you, without your help, it cannot exist!" And I stretched my arms to him with convulsive movements!

"Ah, women, women! They don't understand anything, they are impatient, they don't listen and they worry for no reason. If you had let me speak, this beloved pretty face would not have turned pale. It hurts me to see you suffer. You know very well, Marie, that I love your country, that my intention, my political views, everything leads me to desire its complete restitution. I really want to assist it in its efforts, support its rights!

All that will depend on me, without affecting my duties and the interest of France, I will do, without a doubt, but know that too much distance separates us – that which I can do today

can be destroyed tomorrow. My first duties are for France. I cannot shed French blood for a cause that has no bearing on its interests, arming my people to run to your help whenever necessary. So at any rate, in view of an uncertain future, I am emphasizing the need to improve the lot of the masses, be it at the expense of the chateaux, in order to develop this universal energy that can become a solid support and silence your enemies! Believe me, Marie! The unanimous efforts, spirits of all the populations of your country is a formidable strength that could stand up to more than three enemy nations! But I will support them, I will help them, be sure of that, in every occasion. The brave Polish men who fought at my sides and their very just cause deserve my protection.”

So I calmed down and was brought back to this hope, that, once obtained, I spread around outside, allowing my compatriots to taste its charms and pleasure.

I had made progress in the silent and mysterious language that he was teaching me every evening and that I ended up understanding better than Duroc. I showed my surprise about this dual ability to express both lofty political ideas and the most hidden thoughts of his heart, for in the middle of an animated, very serious conversation, in the heat of narration, with the crowd listening to him attentively, his furtive glances and hand and finger gestures found a way to make me understand everything he wanted to tell me.

“That surprises you, Marie!” he said. “Know that I must carry out with dignity the post I have been given. I have the honor of commanding nations. I was just an acorn, Marie! I have become an oak tree, I dominate, people see me, they observe me from far and near. This situation forces me to play a role that sometimes may not come naturally to me and may bother me, but I must keep going to answer not so much to others, whose approval and opinion are of little concern to me, but to myself, in terms of this perception commanded by the character I inhabit. But while I am the oak tree for everyone, I really like to become the acorn again, for you alone, my good, sweet Marie! Do you understand this and how I can do it? When the crowd is watching us? To tell you, Marie, I love you! And whenever I look at you, I am struck by this desire and I cannot get close to your ear without leaving my role. And that’s what gives me this ability that surprises you.”

He would often scold me for the simplicity of my outfits and the colors that I had adopted. I wore only white, grey and black; he didn’t like these colors and complained about how I didn’t cater to his preferences. I apologized, saying that a Polish woman must wear mourning for her homeland. “Are we not all orphans of Poland? When you respect her, I will wear nothing but pink!”

This is how I would seize every topic of conversation, always going back to the main idea. I thought that success was the only way to purify me and help me accept a position not in keeping with my principles and which made me unhappy!

The Emperor did not like to talk politics with women. In general, he found all women who engage in this ridiculous. “I hate these manly women! They would do better to knit and have babies than to meddle in a science that they are not capable of understanding.” Such are the words I would hear. Often I would even come to the defense of some of these women, whom he accused of this particular fault. Well, I do not understand how freely I was able to introduce this type of conversation without angering him. I think that it was because of the conviction of my disinterestedness as well as the lack of personal ambition in my soul – that

it was filled solely with pure love of my homeland, with no ulterior motive, and that I soothed this soul before him, begging for hope in exchange.

The good and excellent Marshall Duroc also fueled my hope; he loved and valued our country.

The evening before His Majesty was to leave, he said to me, "Patience will lead you to the goal on which your heart is set! Be patient; I guarantee that the complete restoration of your worthy homeland is at the front line of his political plan. But in order to help you effectively, we must first remove some personal obstacles that are very significant, but which we will undoubtedly overcome."

Indeed, the day after this conversation, letters arrived from France and all the countries of Europe, hastening His Majesty's departure.

The continental system, Spain to contain, English plots to foil, Austria to suppress: such were the only great interests that occupied him now.

I was aghast when His Majesty said to me when I arrived at his residence:

"Marie, I'm leaving tomorrow! Great responsibilities are weighing heavily on me. I am being called back to repel the storms that are ready to explode over my people. Will you deprive me of the charm of your presence forever? Do I mean nothing to you?"

I dissolved into tears and I was going to cry, "You're leaving! Without doing anything for us!" That's the feeling that oppressed me and resonated throughout my entire being.

However, I was only preparing the words. What will become of me! Good God! "You will come to Paris, my sweet Marie. You will have Duroc as a guardian; he will watch over your interests. You will contact him for anything. Your desires will be fulfilled – unless you demand the impossible."

"Ah! Sire! You know that I have but one desire! Just one desire, and you know it. My heart creates no others! I wish to remain unsullied by any other gift from you; all the treasures in the world would not satisfy me or lift me up in terms of my own esteem! Give me back my homeland, Sire! Then I will be satisfied and sheltered from deserved contempt. Until then, I would confidently await the effect of your beneficial promises from the shadow of my retreat in the country. Your memory linked with the main theme echoing in my thoughts will be a hidden and sacred fire burning for the religion to which I am devoted, buried in the most secret corners of my heart. I will fuel them with hope, memories and confidence."

"No! No! Marie, that will not happen. I know that you will be able to live without me. I know that your heart is not mine; you don't love me, Marie! I know it, because you are honest, without guile, and that is really why you enchant me, more than any other woman has enchanted me. But you are good and sweet; your heart is so noble, so pure! Could you deprive me of a few moments of bliss with each day spent with you!

Ah! Marie, I would have nothing without you! And I would be the happiest man on earth."



These words were spoken with such a bitter, sad smile, that they inspired a strange feeling in me, for the sovereign of the world!

Pity threw me into his arms and I promised him everything he wanted.

Walewski Family Archives  
"Diary of Marie Walewska"

Transcribed by Alexandre Christian Walewski – March 2006