



The Evil Eye

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Polish

Intermediate
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There once lived a rich gentleman in a mansion on the banks of the river Vistula. All the windows of this house were in the front overlooking the beautiful river. The long avenue, formed of poplar trees, leading to the porch, was overgrown with grass and weeds—a sign that few of his neighbours visited the resident, and that the old Polish hospitality was little practised there.

The owner of this house had lived in it for seven years. He had come from a distant part of the country, and was little known to his peasants, who avoided him with fear and trembling because of the terrible stories told of his evil eye.

He was born of rich parents on the banks of the river San. At the moment of his birth an unlucky star shone upon him, and he became possessed of an evil eye, a glance from which would cause disease and death to man and beast. If, in an unguarded moment, he looked upon the cattle, they died; whatever he regarded and praised, perished. To complete his misfortunes, his father and mother died broken-hearted. The "Evil Eye," as he came to be called in his native place, where his pernicious glances had caused such destruction, sold all his property and removed to the banks of the Vistula. He there took up his abode in a solitary house, dismissed all the domestics, save only one—an old man-servant, who had nursed him in his infancy, and whom alone the evil eye had no power to harm.

The Evil Eye seldom left home, seeing that desolation and even death followed his looks. Whenever he drove out, his old servant sat by his side, to warn him that they were approaching a village, a town, or human being. The unhappy man would then either close his eyes, or cast them down and look on a bundle of pea-straw, which was always lying at his feet.

Knowing the baneful power of his eyes, which in spite of himself brought misery and desolation around him, the unfortunate man had his house so arranged that all the windows looked over the river Vistula. He trusted that by this arrangement he should neither hurt his neighbours nor injure his own property. Twice, in an evil hour, he had looked upon his farm houses, and twice they were burnt. But no precaution would fully suffice to this end. Many vessels were wrecked opposite the White House, as it was commonly called; and the boatmen on the river loaded him with imprecations as they pointed with terror to the large windows from which the Evil Eye brought upon them pain and disaster.

One boatman, more courageous than the rest, rowed to the house and demanded to see its master. The old servant, although fearful of the consequences, took him to the room where his master was dining. Annoyed at being disturbed by a stranger, he looked at the intruder with a scowl, who fell immediately into such a state of alarm that he could not speak a word, but fainted at the door.

The old servant, at the desire of his master, carried the man to his boat, gave him some money, and rowed him to the other side of the river. The poor fellow was ill for a long time, and when he recovered a little he gave a terrible account of the White House and of its master the Evil Eye. This greatly increased the terror of his companions; and whenever any of them passed in their boats or barges near the fatal spot, they would turn

their eyes away from the White House and pray with fervour to be protected from the influence of the Evil Eye.

II.

Ten years had passed away since the White House became the terror of the boatmen and of the neighbouring inhabitants. No one would visit the Evil Eye. He spent his miserable days in silence and solitude.

The following winter proved to be excessively severe. The wolves collected in herds, and maddened with cold and hunger, howled dismally round the house. The master, silent and gloomy, sat before the hearth, on which a large fire was burning, turning over the leaves of a book. The old servant, having fastened the doors, sat on the other side warming himself and repairing a net.

“Stanislas,” said the master, “have you caught many fish to-day?”

“Not many, master; but quite enough to serve us two.”

“True,” said the master sorrowfully, “Although so many years have passed away, we are still but two. Oh, the unhappy hour that gave me birth!”

Suddenly they heard a human voice in the courtyard crying for help. The master started, for it was a long time since he had heard a stranger’s voice. Stanislas ran out of the room, followed by his master, who carried a lamp in his hand.

In front of the door they found a covered sledge, and near it stood an old man calling loudly for assistance. As soon as the stranger saw two men coming towards him with a light, he lifted a lady, his wife, who had fainted, out of the sledge, while old Stanislas assisted a young and beautiful maiden, his daughter, to alight.

Once within doors they piled more wood on the fire, and soon restored the lady to herself. The master of the house, happy to play the host, brought in some good old wine and drank heartily to the health of the father of the young and beautiful girl, and of the two ladies.

The old servant smiled to himself as he looked upon the joyful face of his master, on whose countenance gloom and sorrow had sat almost from his birth.

The visitor, warmed and cheered by the generous wine, told his host how he was overtaken by the storm; how

he had lost his way; had for a long time wandered about seeking a refuge in vain; and how, at last, he was met by a crowd of hungry wolves from whose fangs it was with the greatest difficulty he had escaped to, and found shelter in, the courtyard of the White House.

Soon afterwards the fatigued travellers retired to warm and comfortable rooms to seek the rest they so much needed. Silence reigned again in the hall, broken only now and then by the crackling of the wood fire.

III.

The clock on the mantle-shelf in the hall struck one in the morning. Old Stanislas sat before the fire dozing, and now and then putting on some more fuel, when the door leading from the master's apartments was softly opened and the unfortunate man himself entered the hall. The old servant, half asleep, rubbed his eyes and exclaimed, "Why, master, have you not gone to bed yet?"

"Do not make a noise, my dear old friend," said the master in a pleasant tone of voice; "I feel so happy today that I cannot close my eyes." And he sat down in a large chair before the fire, smiling to himself, joyful even unto tears.

"Ah, cry! poor master, cry!" thought Stanislas. "Perhaps you will cry away your evil eye!"

"If heaven would but grant me what I wish," said the master, "I would ask for nothing more. I have lived for thirty years alone, like a hermit or a criminal, and yet I have committed no crime nor wilfully injured a living creature. And all through my unhappy eyes!"

His face, so smiling a moment before, assumed its usual expression of sorrow; but it soon passed away, as a ray of hope again lighted up the gloom.

"My dear old friend," he began, and Stanislas looked up at his master as he spoke, "it is possible that even I may marry."

"Heaven grant it!" cried the old servant joyfully. "But where are we to find our mistress?"

The master rose, went on tiptoe to the door leading to the travellers' apartments, and pointing with his finger, said in a whisper, "There!"

Stanislas nodded his head approvingly as he put some last logs of wood on the fire for the night. The master, deeply occupied with thought, went to bed. The old servant muttering to himself, "Heaven grant it may come to pass; but I am afraid that pears will never grow on a willow-tree," soon fell fast asleep.

IV.

In the morning, when the travellers arose, they found they could not continue their journey on account of the elder lady's illness. The master of the house heard with pleasure that they were likely to stay for a few days longer. Stanislas began to think that it was possible that pears might grow on a willow-tree.

The visitor was a gentleman in comparatively easy circumstances. It is true he was not rich, but he had means, and was upright and independent. He was pleased with the hospitable master of the house, and after a week's stay he said to his wife, whose health had greatly improved,—"Maggie, do you know that I begin to think our kind host is rather stricken with our Mary; and she, so far as I can see, has no disinclination to his suit. For my part, I should have no objection to the match, provided always that everything else is satisfactory."

"It is only your fancy," answered his wife. She was, however, glad that her husband did not object to what she herself heartily desired.

"He seems to be a very amiable man, well conducted, and to have sufficient means to live upon," continued the father as he walked about the room. "Our daughter, too, is old enough now to enter into the holy state of matrimony."

After supper, the visitor, having partaken of the generous wine of his host, listened with a smiling face to the offer which the master of the house, in a modest manner, made for the hand of his daughter Mary. The father, having considered a little, said,—"I am much pleased with you and your kind proposal. Since you have enough to live upon, and ask for no dowry, I am willing that my daughter should become your wife. May you be happy and blessed in your children."

Three months afterwards the Evil Eye wedded his beautiful wife. The grass and weeds disappeared from the

long avenue of poplar trees leading to the house, trodden down by the horses and carriages of the friends of the bride. But when in a little while all the visitors had departed, the grass and weeds began to grow before the White House as before.

V.

Another winter was approaching, and the inhabitants of the White House had been increased by one person only—its mistress. Most of the numerous servants who were engaged at the marriage, soon ran away in terror, on hearing that their master had an evil eye. The few who remained, having suffered greatly from illness, finally left the house also. Its young and beautiful mistress was deserted; and in the hour of her distress lay alone—forsaken by her friends—on the costly bed. Her husband only was present, his face turned away from her, as he held her cold, damp hand in his own. She knew the terrible effect of his evil eye; she knew that each time he glanced at her, he but added to her pain and sorrow, yet, in her affectionate nature, and loving him, she begged that he would look upon her at least once more.

“Oh, Mary!” cried the unhappy man, with a deep sigh, “I know I can never be happy with you so long as I have my sight. Here is a knife—cut out my eyes! Done by your dear hand the act will lose its pain and anguish.”

The poor wife trembled with horror at the proposal, and her husband, seeing that he could not prevail upon her, sank in a chair, and shed bitter tears.

“Of what value to me is this heavenly gift—the gift of sight!” he exclaimed. “At every glance I bring destruction and misery about me! No wonder, dearest Mary, that your pain is great: a tree would wither as I looked at it. But take courage, love; I will not look upon our child. Him at least my eyes shall not injure.”

The suffering woman answered him only with a groan. He called the old servant in, and left her. Soon afterwards two cries, unlike in their sound, were heard in the house. The one—the joyful cry of a new-born infant, as it first saw the light; the other—the agonised cry of a man, the infant’s father, as he parted with sight for ever! His eyes, glittering like two diamonds, lay on the ground by the side of a blood-stained knife.

VI.

Another six years had passed away. Windows had been made on the side of the White House from which a

beautiful view of the village and fields could be obtained. The boatmen now often stopped near the house to rest. Its mistress was well and happy: blessed in a beautiful daughter, who was the guide of her blind father. The peasants no longer ran away at the sight of their master. The former silence reigned no more at the White House, numerous servants were in attendance, and the whole place was full of life and bustle.

Old Stanislas, who had buried his master's eyes at the time of the self-sacrifice, was now bent with age. One day, curious to know whether they had perished or not, he dug for them in the ground. Suddenly they glared upon him like two live coals. As soon as their baneful light shone upon his wrinkled face, the old man shivered, fell down, and died.

This was the first and last time that the evil eye exercised its power for harm upon the old servant. For as the master loved him dearly, so his heart counteracted the effect of his eye; but now the eyes, long buried in the ground, and freed from the influence of the heart of their master, had acquired additional strength for evil, and killed the poor old man.

The blind master deeply lamented his faithful servant. In memory of his fidelity he erected a handsome cross over his grave, beneath which the boatmen often prayed.

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