

**DISTAFF:  
A NOVEL**

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Distaff: a novel by Marya Rodziewicz

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**MARYA RODZIEWICZ**

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# DISTAFF

*A NOVEL*

BY

MARYA RODZIEWICZ

*Author of*

"Anima Vilis," etc., etc.

*TRANSLATED BY S. C. DE SOISSONS*

SANS PEUR ET  
SANS REPROCHE



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## CHAPTER I.

PANI (MRS.) TAIDA SKARSEWSKI was not liked in the neighbourhood, but all were compelled to respect her and to acknowledge that she was a worthy woman.

She was reared by misery and work ; misery and work were her teachers, misery and work were her companions and guides through life. In their company her heart had become hard and her character despotic, even her features, voice, and expression had grown harsh. She had no mercy on feebleness ; she considered duty a virtue, work the only purpose of life ; she despised a lazy person as a culprit ; she told persons the truth to their face ; she did not believe in bad health, in unfavourable circumstances, temptations, and downfalls, in faulty education or hereditary failings. For her people were not

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divided into classes and sexes ; there were working-people—to them belonged the soil ; there were lazy people—for them there was Siberia, the prison, and had she been a legislator, she would unhesitatingly have added—the gallows.

Once, one of her relations lost heavily gambling, and, pressed by necessity, came to beseech her for help. Pani Taida's hair was already white, but she had overcome poverty, and could help him. She received him in a barn, where she was surveying wheat destined for the market, and immediately scolded him for coming on an ordinary day when she was busy and could not go into the drawing-room to entertain him. Timidly he told of his misfortune.

She was furious.

“ Misfortune ! How dare you call it misfortune ! Misfortune is a sacred thing. God sends it. It's Jesus' thorns ! But your misfortune deserves the gallows. I will let you have a rope, here it is, go and hang yourself, you knave.”

“ But, dear aunt, I acknowledge my fault, and I promise you never to touch cards again ; but this time you must help me. I don't care much about myself, but about the land. My heart bleeds when I think that I may lose my estate of Zapole.”

“ Rest easy. The land will not perish because of

a knave ; on the contrary, it will breathe easier when you no longer tread on it. You care for it! You cultivate it, indeed! If all you knaves, gamblers, sluggards, and profligates would disappear, then, perhaps, the unfortunate soil would breathe easier. You are noxious worms and weeds! And you dare come to me for help! Then here it is!”

And she threw a rope at his feet.

Her relation was deeply offended and ceased visiting her. To tell the truth, very few people visited Ruda, Pani Taida's estate, for nearly everyone had heard a sermon there, and had had bitter truths cast at them. Besides, Pani Taida did not care much for guests, for she used to say,

“I tried it when I was young, but it was not worth while. Guests take up your time, interrupt work, and what benefit comes of it? You hear only gossip and slander, for they talk nothing else ; they only criticize, judge, and laugh at their fellow-men. Then they go on further, and what they have said they say you have said, at the same time adding something to it, and a quarrel with a neighbour is ready at once. Nothing good remains when the guests are gone—only irritation and dirt! Then I have no time for visiting.”

She said this openly, consequently people regarded her as a miser and a shrew, and the road

leading to the house in Ruda was covered with grass, for Pani Taida never used her horses purely for pleasure.

During the year she went to the parish church on holy days, several times to the country town, and occasionally visited her brothers and sisters; this was her only intercourse with the world.

Throughout her whole life she read the *Warsaw Gazette*, and believed its political and agricultural articles. Then she subscribed for the *Country*, but soon dropped it.

“One can get the jaundice from irritation through reading their polemics! And what is the benefit of it? I know that life is hard, that our situation is unbearable! But if somebody talked to me about it constantly, I should lose my strength and be unable to work! A man does not live twice, neither can he select his lot. He is obliged to bear the one destined for him. There will be order in the other world, but never here!”

Pani Taida was not a bigot. She recited her prayers at daybreak, whilst going to inspect the farming, and in the evening whilst undressing. On Sundays she read from a Prayer Book she had inherited from her mother, and when in distress, she opened at random St. Paul's Epistles and read a page—that was all. She was always modestly