

**A SECRET
MISSION: A NOVEL**

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A Secret Mission: A Novel by Emily Gerard

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EMILY GERARD

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561 Emily Gerard

A SECRET MISSION

A Novel



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A SECRET MISSION.

CHAPTER I

THE OGRE.

"Soyez l'homme des champs ; votre rôle est sublime."

—JACQUES DELILLE.

A WHITE low-storied house, some straggling oak-trees grouped about it, stands on the left bank of the river Vistula, somewhere midway between Warsaw and the German frontier.

It is the 9th of April, 1887, and evening. The master of the house, mounted on a stout iron-gray cob, is slowly returning homewards from the village that lies a little way off. The name of the white house—likewise that of the adjoining village—is Stara-Wola, and its owner is called Felicyan Starowolski.

Felicyan Starowolski is a tall, massively framed man turned forty, who might have been stout but for his active and sober habits, and who might have been good-looking if put in the hands of a fashionable tailor and barber. He does not look particularly handsome this evening, attired in a shabby coat of faded fustian, clumsy hob-nailed high boots, and an old brown fur cap, which from constant friction has acquired some resemblance to a mangy caterpillar. His full, bushy beard—dark and slightly curly—might have been improved by a little judicious trimming ; and his large, rough, red hands have been none the worse for a closer acquaintance with the glovemaker. But his bearing is erect and self-reliant, and his eyes—concealed by no disfiguring glasses—singularly direct and

straightforward in their gaze. A little wanting in penetration perhaps; eyes that were more likely to reveal their owner's secrets than to discover those of other people. Eminently a contented, healthy, and prosperous-looking man was Felicyan Starowski, as leisurely dismounting from the iron-gray cob—his faithful companion in field and forest—he dismissed it with a resounding slap on the shoulder, and entered the house by the back-door leading from the yard, bringing along with him a subtle but pungent odor of animal and vegetable life—that indefinable essence which, suggestive of budding leaves, sprouting grain, damp, upturned earth-clods, new-born lambs, and daisy-sprinkled meadows, seems to envelop the agriculturist, just as the salt sea-brine clings about the sailor even on shore.

Several large, rough-haired dogs, lying about the corridor in postures of unconventional ease, look up lovingly at their master's approach or greet him with a ponderous wag of their mud-incrusted tails, which rattle against the deal flooring like wooden castanets. One yellow mongrel, younger and more impulsive than the others, receives him with a profusion of well-meant but uncouth caresses, directed indiscriminately at hands, ankles, and knees.

"Down, Burek, down," said Felicyan, with some difficulty extricating himself from the animal's slobbery embraces. At sound of his voice a door at the farther end of the passage was opened, and a fat, rosy boy of four ran to meet his father.

"The Swiencone* is all prepared in the saloon, Papeciu. † Come and see," and, taking hold of his father's hand in his small chubby fingers, he tried to drag him in that direction.

"And the priest was here this afternoon to bless the food," said a girl of seven, who had followed her brother into the passage, "and I helped mamma and Ciocia ‡ Luba to arrange the *babas* and *plackis*." §

* Easter repast, consisting of cold blessed viands.

† Diminutive of papa.

‡ Ciocia—maternal aunt.

§ *Babas* and *plackis*, two sorts of cake always baked at Easter in

"I helped, too," said the boy, defiantly. "I carried a basket of eggs from the kitchen."

"But you ate two of them on the way," said his sister, reprovingly.

"Only because the eggs first tumbled down and got broken, and so I had to eat them," explained Kostus,* apologetically.

"Then you are too young to carry eggs if you let them fall," retorted Zosia, with the conscious virtue of one who has alike outlived the awkwardness of youth as well as the sordid temptations of the flesh.

The boy's rosy lips drooped ominously, as though a storm were not far off.

"Never mind, Kostusio," said Felicyan, taking hold of the child in his great strong arms, and tossing him up to the ceiling with a deft movement acquired by long practice; "never mind; you are not too young to eat eggs, and eggs were made to be eaten."

Kostus smiled again, quite convinced by the paternal logic.

"Eggs were made to be eaten," he repeated, gleefully, "and *babas* and *placzkis* too, are they not, father? Come and look at them, how fine and large they are!—and, oh! there is such a beautiful calf's head with a lemon in its mouth!"

The Paschal repast, *de rigueur* in every orthodox Polish house, was laid out in a long, low apartment of more comfortable than elegant appearance, a corner room with four windows, of which three looked out to the front on to an open veranda, beyond which glimpses might be had of the grand old river scarce a hundred paces distant; the fourth window commanded a small kitchen garden, enclosed in rather dilapidated planking, and which at the present season showed little else but straggling rows of well-meaning but weak-minded onions and radishes, with here and there

Poland, the former high and crisp, the latter flat, and inlaid with preserved fruits.

* Kostus, diminutive of Konstantine.

a lanky stake, round which there twined the parched and faded wreck of what last year was a haricot bean. Leaning against the planking, in one corner, was a solitary melon-frame, like a delicate invalid, still much huddled up in straw, despite the genial warmth of the April day. Faded curtains, which once had been red, matched the covers of chairs and sofa of convenient but antediluvian shapes; the discolored wall-paper, which had done duty for a score of years, was partially concealed—though scarcely embellished—by a few old, dingy French engravings representing the loves of Paul and Virginia, whose tarnished gilt frames had become so thickly speckled by fly-stains as to present the appearance of some intricate antique design executed in black and gold; speckled, likewise, in the same disfiguring fashion, were two large mirrors, which hung on the long side of the room. These mirrors, of a cheap and inferior quality, which Felician, at the time of his marriage, had purchased from a Jewish colporteur, served well enough to fill up the spaces between the windows; but, viewed as reflectors of the human form divine, they were rather a failure; for whereas the one had a tendency to render tall, narrow-shouldered, and consumptive-looking whoever rashly confided their image to its surface, the other, in equal degree, was prone to metamorphose people into fat, squat dwarfs, with curtailed necks and hideously distended mouths. A never-failing source of amusement to the children, these mirrors; they had christened them the fat and the thin looking-glasses, and as such considered them to be infinitely superior to more literate reflectors which had no such humorous freaks.

Two thirds of the apartment, the only large room in the house, were to-day taken up by a long table, groaning beneath the weight of tall, crisp *babas*, flat, luscious *placébis*, dishes of ham or of roast sucking-pig, and piles of colored eggs temptingly ranged around the calf's head in the centre.

Two women—evidently sisters—were engaged in putting the last touches to the banquet-table. Both were