

## **The Good Lady from the Castle in Działdowo**

In the northern part of Działdowo, a town located on important traffic routes leading to Warsaw, the Baltic Sea and Warmia, dating back to the first half of the 14th century, there is an old Teutonic castle situated on a hill. It was erected at a border with former lands belonging to the Old Prussians. The massive, strong building was to serve as a watchtower and protect against raiders from the neighbouring region of Mazovia.

Over hundreds of years, windstorms and blizzards caused a lot of destruction to the castle. Today the castle, plundered and riddled from the outside, stands like a decrepit old man in rags, waiting for a caring hand to cover his jagged spine and preserve it for posterity. It has witnessed numerous historical events. It has seen and still remembers the heroic fight of those subjugated by the Teutonic Order, the battle cries of Lithuanian troops, fuelled by revenge and retaliation, it remembers the great days of the Battle of Grunwald, the Thirteen Years' War, Swedish and Napoleonic Wars, the war cries of Tatar troops, the loud echoes of the uprising attempts from 1830 and 1863, and cries of prisoners of the strict penal camp from the period of the Nazi occupation...

The aged walls of the Działdowo castle also hold an interesting local legend, which captures attention and stops every visitor in their tracks. When asked to tell the story, an old gentleman from a small nearby house asks you, Dear Reader, to follow him into the area of the old settlement and sit down in the castle courtyard covered with tall grass, as he begins telling the following tale:

Around 1360, the Działdowo castle was ruled by a stern master. He was tall, with broad shoulders, a deep voice and evil sparkling eyes, so he inspired mistrust, disgust and fear wherever he went. None of the town dwellers dared to come close to that dangerous and stern man. Many townsmen preferred to suffer harm rather than stand before the strict master.

The man, a descendant of some German nobility, had travelled around the world for a long time, as it was customary for Medieval western knights; he had visited many different countries and numerous castles, often participated in tournaments and bloody expeditions. While in Spain, he had fallen in love with the daughter of one of the local dukes and he finally won her over. But a serious illness and death of the beautiful princess had pushed him once again onto the path of a wanderer, which led him to the Teutonic Order.

The knight could not get over the death of his beautiful Spanish sweetheart for a long time, he kept away from people and lived the life of a loner. He had no friends and did not look for any. Having lost his own happiness, he did not wish happiness to anyone else. While staying away from people, he sought satisfaction in his violent, wild thoughts.

The only person for whom the cold Teutonic Knight's heart still had a little sparkle of kindness and love was his youngest sister. He calmed down in her presence after returning from Spain to his family home somewhere in the Harz mountains. The girl was beautiful on the outside and even more on the inside with amazing virtues, heart and mind, and her light-hearted joy, honesty, kindness and infinite goodness brought sunshine everywhere she went and attracted everyone who found themselves in her presence. She was the one her brother would often think about on long winter evenings, as he spent his days alone as the master of the castle in Działdowo. That is why he decided to bring her over there.

Straight away, the young girl gave the grim castle a new lease of life. Skilful and resourceful, she found her way around the kitchen and the castle chambers. As she was approachable and kind to everyone, she became very popular among the servants and workers. Just how new life grows and spreads in gloom dead soil, life was blossoming in the castle of Działdowo. Even the evil and always gloomy brother became more cheerful over time, and his voice sounded less stern and strict.

News about the young good lady of the castle spread among the townspeople and local peasants. They were still afraid of the strict master, but they started to communicate their asks and

requests through the young lady more and more often. The girl was able to arrange everything so that nearly all requests were positively satisfied. The local residents grew to like her a lot for that and no one would refer to her any differently than “our good lady”.

Some time after the girl's arrival at the castle in Działdowo an event took place which would change the rest of her life.

In a battle with the Old Prussians, who were still causing trouble here or there, the Prussian commander, who had been wanted for a long time, was seriously hurt and captured. The young man came from an excellent family, he was brave and valiant, and he was the biggest enemy of the Teutonic Order. So when the cruel Teutonic Knight caught such a dangerous enemy, he ordered to have the badly injured prisoner thrown into a dungeon, where he was to die of starvation.

The news also reached the girl. With mercy in her heart, she kept asking her brother to spare the prisoner until he finally agreed, and she was even allowed to treat the injured man. So the prisoner was placed under her care. The brave warrior's strong character, and most of all the girl's kindness, helped the injured man quickly regain his health. It soon turned out that his favourite activity was to play the violin. So he would sit up on his bed, playing passionately for hours on end.

The girl would listen to those subtle and longing sounds, and as her heart was sensitive to all that was good and beautiful, she fell in love with his songs. Over time she started to long to hear them and could not wait for the evening, when the young son of the wilderness would grab his favourite instrument and play.

With the masterful sounds of this charming melody in the background, threads of a friendship between those two people, who had been complete strangers not much earlier, were being woven, growing longer and stronger. Every word and every song, every sound of the young man's violin was like a sweet refreshing nectar, quenching great thirst. With that invigorating nectar, that growing life force, the most beautiful plant, the most amazing flower in the world started to sprout and grow in the girl's heart – love.

It was the same for the young Prussian. The care and kindness he experienced from her, the goodness and charm of the girl nursing him to health pulled on all strings of his heart. Just like he developed a fondness for his caring nurse from the first moment he met her, he soon fell in love with her deeply and whole-heartedly.

Both youngsters felt the joint rhythm of each other's hot young hearts. They followed the train of each other thoughts, which all revolved around only one thing, and listened to that harmonious anthem of love. So from time to time their hands would meet and they would whisper words which came from deep inside their loving hearts.

The fate smiled at the young Prussian. He could see and understood that he was not just a prisoner of the dangerous Teutonic Knight, but also a slave of his beautiful sister.

But a day came when the brave Prussian, healed and with restored strength, was sent to do heavy labour by the stern master. The girl tried to influence her brother, asking him to ease the prisoner's difficult life, but he had not been satisfied with his revenge on the conquered enemy yet, so he refused to listen to her.

The young couple were unable to see each other anymore. Days when the master went hunting were the sweetest moments in the poor prisoner's hard, routine life. He would glance at the girl with gratitude and love, and through this unspoken language, through the sparkling, longing glances, they understood each other very well.

Each night after seeing each other the young Prussian would play passionately for long hours, as if to compensate his beloved for the time spent apart.

But their blooming garden of love was soon to be hit by lightning.

The evil master had a friend near Działdowo, a rich nobleman, whom he visited during his hunting trips. They shared a similar character, so they quickly grew to like each other and the

nobleman would visit the castle more and more often. That was where he met the sister of the master of Działdowo and soon asked for her hand in marriage. But as she was bound by love to the young prisoner, she opposed marrying a man she did not like. Finally, her brother, who was the girl's guardian, pressed by the nobleman, agreed for her to marry the nobleman against her will.

The girl was in utter despair; she stayed awake many a night and did not eat for many days.

Finally, she managed to communicate with the young prisoner and they decided to run away into deep wilderness to look for shelter among Prussian people. The girl prepared the plan for their escape.

It was a foggy autumn evening. There was a little drizzle of rain. The vast, empty courtyard was glowing in the night light. All staff, except for guards, were inside the castle. At 10 p.m. all lights were put out. People laid down to rest for the night.

But the young girl and her beloved did not think of sleeping that night. Even though they were apart, they were together in thoughts. They waited impatiently for the agreed hour.

Finally, the time they had been waiting for came. A servant, who the couple had bribed, appeared on the courtyard with a horse. The girl came into the courtyard next, followed by the young prisoner a few moments later. They did not say a word to each other, only their glowing eyes were saying: "There, behind that gate, freedom, life and happiness await us". Both their hearts were beating out of their chests.

The young man quickly jumped on the horse and extended his arm to the girl. But as soon as they sat in the saddle, two servants, who must have been waiting for them, jumped out, grabbed the young man and constrained him.

– Take him to the dungeon! – they heard an angry voice.

The girl slipped of the horse unconscious – the servants carried her to her chamber.

Meanwhile, the master was raging. Anyone who came near him was in trouble: servants were trembling for fear or staying away as much as possible. The man's sister did not see him for five days. On the sixth day he came into her chamber and announced in a stern voice:

– You are getting married in two days.

The girl fell into despair again. She paced around like a lioness locked in a cage.

Meanwhile the young man, thrown into a damp dungeon, was dealing with millions of thoughts going through his head. He knew that one of the servants had betrayed them, but as a tough warrior, he handled his cruel fate better than the girl. His heart was aching at the thought of their lost happiness. While waiting for sudden death at the hand of his hated enemy, he felt great pain in knowing that he will never gaze into the eyes of his beloved again.

Finally, came the day of the wedding between the poor girl and the nobleman. The wedding feast was held at the castle. The stern master ordered the servants to keep refilling cups again and again. The guests partied and enjoyed themselves. Meanwhile, the bride, sitting by her husband, barely wet her lips with wine. Her face was extremely pale. She kept thinking about her loved one.

When the party, fuelled with wine, was in full swing, the prisoner was brought into room.

The Prussian looked into the eyes of his beloved with deep sadness, but stood in front of the feasting guests with his head held high. Then the drunken master ordered his staff to give the young prisoner his favourite violin so he can play some cheerful music. When the prisoner heard those words, a hint of anger appeared in his grey eyes, he looked once again at the pale, sad face of the bride and threw the violin forcefully at the Teutonic Knight's feet. Seeing that desperate but daring act, the proud master jumped up as if someone had poked him with a knife, grabbed a sword and buried it deep into the chest of the helpless prisoner. The young man stumbled and fell at the feet of his beloved. A horrific scream was heard and the bride fainted, slipping motionless off the chair.

The feast stopped. Servants spent the whole evening trying to bring the girl round. It was not until a week later before she was taken to the nobleman's residence. Unable to extinguish the past

flame in her heart and bring herself to love the man she married against her will, she died shortly afterwards.

And the evil man could never find his peace again. He struggled the most on long winter evenings. He tried to drown out the voice of his conscience with wine, but neither wine nor frequent hunting trips could settle his uneasy, troubled mind.

– That is the story of the local castle told by my father and grandfather, which I am telling you now, Dear Listener – the old man finishes his story.

It has been several hundred years since those events. The defensive walls of the Działdowo castle have become brittle, some ceilings have collapsed, the stories of many evil masters from this area have been forgotten. However, the story of the beautiful good lady, sister of the stern Teutonic Knight, still circulates among the residents of Działdowo. Through the legend, people still see her as beautiful, young, and in love, mounting a black horse on a foggy autumn evening each year together with her beloved imprisoned fiddler. The courtyard becomes alive with the sound of the horse's hoofs, quickly drowned out by a strong wind. On those evenings, the wind tells a sad story, which has been told in Działdowo and the entire Masurian region many a time over the centuries, calling for vengeance for the Teutonic wickedness, the baseness of the traitor, and the oppression and lawlessness of foreign masters.

Teofil Ruczyński, *Klechdy Domowe. Podania i legendy polskie*, Warszawa 1986.