

Baroness Mathilda von Wrede
Taken from *Dr. Baedeker* by Robert Sloan Latimer



To write the story of Dr. Baedeker in Finland is to tell of the earlier years of the work of the Baroness Mathilda von Wrede.... To her was given the honour of taking the doctor inside the gates of a Finnish prison for the first time. That first visit was made to the prison at Helsingfors on the 3rd June. 1887. On his subsequent visits the young Baroness was his faithful helper and interpreter. Her influence in the prisons is still a great blessing; for she has consecrated her gifts and her life to the service. University professors frequently interpreted for the doctor. On one occasion when a professor was translating, the convicts stood in their ranks respectfully listening, a set, stony look upon their faces. It was plain that they were quite unmoved. On his next visit to the same place the doctor was

accompanied by the Baroness. He had not proceeded far with his address before the moist eyes of the listeners, and the convulsive twitching of their features, told him that the, “arrows were sharp in the heart of the King's enemies.”

“How was it?” he afterwards inquired wonderingly of one of the officers in attendance, “My former appeal they heard with indifference, and even resentment. Today the Word has found their consciences and hearts. Where lay the difference?”

The prison-officer's reply was significant: “The difference, sir; was in the translation. When you said 'My beloved friends,' or 'My brothers,' your clever professor invariably, translated the expressions 'men,' 'prisoners.' But the young lady translated it into Finnish as you expressed it in German: 'My beloved friends,' and ' My brothers.' The key that opened their hearts was human compassion and affection. They are not used to it.”

The Baroness von Wrede is the daughter of a former Governor of the Wasa Province. When quite a girl, her heart and life were surrendered to Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit. She began to seek for souls in the convict-prisons of Finland when about nineteen years of age, her father's high position giving her access to places to which ordinary persons would have been curtly denied admission.

For years her influence for good among the convicted criminal classes of Finland has been extraordinary. In her early womanhood she appeared to be the victim of a rapid decline, and the doctors gave but little hope that her life could be saved.

Her father was in an agony of grief. “O Matilda!” he cried, “What can I do to save you? Will you not try to get well again? Will you arouse and determine to recover if I promise to give you a house, an institute, for your prisoners' mission?”

“Yes, dear father,” she replied, her eyes sparkling brightly at the prospect. “Indeed, I will. God helping me, I will be strong again.”

She made a good recovery, and gained the house for her prisoners; and, in addition, a considerable extent of land. For her overjoyed father, as a thank-offering, made over to her one of his estates in Finland. The place was prepared for the reception of discharged prisoners who gave signs of sincere penitence and a genuine desire for reformation. One of her brothers (a man like-minded with herself) took the oversight of this humane and Christian enterprise. On one occasion the Baroness, calling at a prison on her customary visitation, was informed that a particularly violent and

ferocious criminal was in his cell awaiting trial and punishment. He was charged with the commission of no fewer than eighteen murders, some of them being of peculiar atrocity;

“Let me see him,” she begged of the Governor.

The Governor smiled pityingly upon her. “My dear child, I could not think of such a thing.”

“But I must see him. God can save even such as he! Where is his cell?”

It was not difficult to discover the cell, for there were several armed warders on guard outside the heavy door. “Open, and let me go in!” she demanded.

“I really dare not let you risk your life. It is far too unsafe. He is almost a maniac!” said the alarmed Governor.

However, the young Christian worker declared she was willing to take all risk, and insisted on gaining admittance to the cell; so with great reluctance, and many protests, they yielded.

“Please do not touch the little slide in the door to peep in; nor interrupt us while I am in there!” was her parting request to the little group of amazed officials who stood in the corridor.

Then the warder turned his key and withdrew the bolts, and cautiously opening the door a little way, the heroine glided inside. A slight rattle of chains directed her attention to the object of her search, stretched at full length upon his hard bench. He was a huge, massive giant of a man. Quickly she walked to where he lay, and stooped slightly over him.

“Are you awake?” she inquired.

The murderer gave a sudden start, as if electrified. It was almost a leap bodily into the air; and his heavy irons clanked loudly as he fell back upon the bench.

“I have come to see you,” she said gently. There was no answer. “Won't you talk to me?”

“Who are you?” he inquired fiercely.

“I am a friend. I want to be kind to you, and to help you.”

“Who sent you here?”

“I have come of my own wish, for your sake.”

“I could kill you with one blow! Get out of my cell! he cried hoarsely, and his chains rattled again with the violence of his passion.

“But you won't kill me,” she replied, with a silvery little laugh. “That would not be any use. I want to do you good, not harm – to speak to you about the Lord Jesus.”

“Go away, I tell you! I will not listen.” Again the rattling links, as the ruffian put up his hands to his ears.

“Then I shall pray for you at home; and I shall come to see you again soon. We all need forgiveness and when I pray, I will ask God to forgive you as well as myself. Good-bye!”

The prisoner made no reply, and she left the cell as quietly as she had entered.

Again and again the Baroness visited that criminal, and gently pleaded with his seared and deadened conscience.

“I want to know who you are?” he asked, on one occasion, curiosity overcoming his petulance.

“I am the daughter of Baron von Wrede,” she replied.

The prisoner stared at her. “You never mean to tell me that a morsel like you are the daughter of that fine handsome man!” he exclaimed.

“Of course I am,” she said. “We cannot all be tall and handsome like my father and you!”

At this pleasant compliment his hostility completely collapsed. He was silent for a minute or two. “It is not the least use your talking to me,” he resumed. “Nobody can do me any good. My heart is a rock!”

“How glad I am to hear you say that!” she answered brightly.

“What do you mean?” he inquired angrily.

“I am glad your heart is a rock,” she explained; “for I have seen flowers, yes, and sometimes even trees growing from the rock, and so have you. A tiny seed falls into a crevice in the side of the rock, and takes root, and grows, and covers the rock with beauty. So I hope some word the Lord will give me for you, may take root in your rocky heart, and grow. I am praying that it may be so.”

And it was so. Her prayers were answered. That cruel unmanageable murderer became a changed man. God gave her that soul. His ferocity left him. With deep penitence he took his awful crimes to Him who said, “I will in no wise reject him that comes.”