wrote with two kinds of readers in view, — those who are already well acquainted with Slav history, and those who do not know this history yet, but who may be roused to examine it for themselves. I hope to give a sketch of this history in a future not too remote, with an account of the sources of original information ; so that impartial students, as Americans are by position, may have some assistance in beginning a work of such commanding importance as the history of Poland and Russia.

JEREMIAH CURTIN

WASHINGTON, D. C., April 4, 1890.

WITH FIRE AND SWORD.

CHAPTER I.

THE year 1647 was that wonderful year in which manifold signs in the heavens and on the earth announced misfortunes of some kind and unusual events. Contemporary chroniclers relate that beginning with spring-time myriads of locusts swarmed from the Wilderness, destroying the grain and the grass; this was a forerunner of Tartar raids. In the summer there was a great eclipse of the sun, and soon after a comet appeared in the sky. In Warsaw a tomb was seen over the city, and a fiery cross in the clouds; fasts were held and alms given, for some men declared that a plague would come on the land and destroy the people. Finally, so mild a winter set in, that the oldest inhabitants could not remember the like of it. In the southern provinces ice did not confine the rivers, which, swollen by the daily melting of snows, left their courses and flooded the banks. Rainfalls were frequent. The steppe was drenched, and became an immense slough. The sun was so warm in the south that, wonder of wonders! in Bratslav and the Wilderness a green fleece covered the steppes and plains in the middle of December. The swarms in the beehives began to buzz and bustle; cattle were bellowing in the fields. Since such an order of things appeared altogether unnatural, all men in Russia who were waiting or looking for unusual events turned their excited minds and eyes especially to the Wilderness, from which rather than anywhere else danger might show itself.

At that time there was nothing unusual in the Wilderness, — no struggles there, nor encounters, beyond those

of ordinary occurrence, and known only to the eagles, hawks, ravens, and beasts of the plain. For the Wilderness was of this character at that period. The last traces of settled life ended on the way to the south, at no great distance beyond Chigirin on the side of the Dnieper, and on the side of the Dniester not far from Uman; then forward to the bays and sea there was nothing but steppe after steppe, hemmed in by the two rivers as by a frame. At the bend of the Dnieper in the lower country beyond the Cataracts Cossack life was seething, but in the open plains no man dwelt; only along the shores were nestled here and there little fields, like islands in the sea. The land belonged in name to Poland, but it was an empty land, in which the Commonwealth permitted the Tartars to graze their herds; but since the Cossacks prevented this frequently, the field of pasture was a field of battle too.

How many struggles were fought in that region, how many people had laid down their lives there, no man had counted, no man remembered. Eagles, falcons, and ravens alone saw these; and whoever from a distance heard the sound of wings and the call of ravens, whoever beheld the whirl of birds circling over one place, knew that corpses or unburied bones were lying beneath. Men were hunted in the grass as wolves or wild goats. All who wished, engaged in this hunt. Fugitives from the law defended themselves in the wild steppes. The armed herdsman guarded his flock, the warrior sought adventure, the robber plunder, the Cossack a Tartar, the Tartar a Cossack. It happened that whole bands guarded herds from troops of robbers. The steppe was both empty and filled, quiet and terrible, peaceable and full of ambushes; wild by reason of its wild plains, but wild, too, from the wild spirit of men.

At times a great war filled it. Then there flowed over it like waves Tartar chambuls, Cossack regiments, Polish or Wallachian companies. In the night-time the neighing of horses answered the howling of wolves, the voices of drums and brazen trumpets flew on to the island of Ovid and the sea, and along the black trail of Kutchman there seemed an inundation of men. The boundaries of the Commonwealth were guarded from Kamenyets to the Dnieper by outposts and stanitsas; and when the roads were about to swarm with people, it was known especially by the countless flocks of birds which, frightened by the Tartars, flew onward to the

north. But the Tartar, if he slipped out from the Black Forest or crossed the Dniester from the Wallachian side, came by the southern provinces together with the birds.

That winter, however, the birds did not come with their uproar to the Commonwealth. It was stiller on the steppe than usual. At the moment when our narrative begins the sun was just setting, and its reddish rays threw light on a land entirely empty. On the northern rim of the Wilderness, along the Omelnik to its mouth, the sharpest eye could not discover a living soul, nor even a movement in the dark, dry, and withered steppe grass. The sun showed but half its shield from behind the horizon. The heavens became obscured, and then the steppe grew darker and darker by degrees. Near the left bank, on a small height resembling more a grave-mound than a hill, were the mere remnants of a walled stanitsa which once upon a time had been built by Fedor Buchatski and then torn down by raids. A long shadow stretched from this ruin. In the distance gleamed the waters of the widespread Omelnik, which in that place turned toward the Dnieper. But the lights went out each moment in the heavens and on the earth. From the sky were heard the cries of storks in their flight to the sea; with this exception the stillness was unbroken by a sound.

Night came down upon the Wilderness, and with it the hour of ghosts. Cossacks on guard in the stanitsas related in those days that the shades of men who had fallen in sudden death and in sin used to rise up at night and carry on dances in which they were hindered neither by cross nor church. Also, when the wicks which showed the time of midnight began to burn out, prayers for the dead were offered throughout the stanitsas. It was said, too, that the shades of mounted men coursing through the waste barred the road to wayfarers, whining and begging them for a sign of the holy cross. Among these ghosts vampires also were met with, who pursued people with howls. A trained ear might distinguish at a distance the howls of a vampire from those of a wolf. Whole legions of shadows were also seen, which sometimes came so near the stanitsas that the sentries sounded the alarm. This was generally the harbinger of a great war.

The meeting of a single ghost foreboded no good, either; but it was not always necessarily of evil omen, for frequently a living man would appear before travellers and

vanish like a shadow, and therefore might easily and often be taken for a ghost.

Night came quickly on the Omelnik, and there was nothing surprising in the fact that a figure, either a man or a ghost, made its appearance at the side of the deserted stanitsa. The moon coming out from behind the Dnieper whitened the waste, the tops of the thistles, and the distance of the steppe. Immediately there appeared lower down on the plain some other beings of the night. The flitting clouds hid the light of the moon from moment to moment; consequently those figures flashed up in the darkness at one instant, and the next they were blurred. At times they disappeared altogether, and seemed to melt in the shadow. Pushing on toward the height on which the first man was standing, they stole up quietly, carefully, slowly, halting at intervals.

There was something awe-exciting in their movements, as there was in all that steppe which was so calm in appearance. The wind at times blew from the Dnieper, causing a mournful rustle among the dried thistles, which bent and trembled as in fear. At last the figures vanished in the shadow of the ruins. In the uncertain light of that hour nothing could be seen save the single horseman on the height.

But the rustle arrested his attention. Approaching the edge of the mound, he began to look carefully into the steppe. At that moment the wind stopped, the rustling ceased; there was perfect rest.

Suddenly a piercing whistle was heard; mingled voices began to shout in terrible confusion, "Allah! Allah! Jesus Christ! Save! Kill!" The report of muskets re-echoed; red flashes rent the darkness. The tramp of horses was heard with the clash of steel. Some new horsemen rose as it were from beneath the surface of the steppe. You would have said that a storm had sprung up on a sudden in that silent and ominous land. The shrieks of men followed the terrible clash. Then all was silent; the struggle was over.

Apparently one of its usual scenes had been enacted in the Wilderness.

The horsemen gathered in groups on the height; a few of them dismounted, and examined something carefully. Meanwhile a powerful and commanding voice was heard in the darkness.

"Strike a fire in front!"

In a moment sparks sprang out, and soon a blaze flashed up from the dry reeds and pitch-pine which wayfarers through the Wilderness always carried with them.

Straightway the staff for a hanging-lamp was driven into the earth. The glare from above illuminated sharply a number of men who were bending over a form stretched motionless on the ground.

These men were soldiers, in red uniforms and wolf-skin caps. Of these, one who sat on a valiant steed appeared to be the leader. Dismounting, he approached the prostrate figure and inquired, —

"Well, Sergeant, is he alive yet, or is it all over with him?"

"He is alive, but there is a rattling in his throat; the lariat stifled him."

"Who is he?"

"He is not a Tartar; some man of distinction."

"Then God be thanked!"

The chief looked attentively at the prostrate man.

"Well, just like a hetman."

"His horse is of splendid Tartar breed; the Khan has no better," said the sergeant. "There he stands."

The lieutenant looked at the horse, and his face brightened. Two soldiers held a really splendid steed, who, moving his ears and distending his nostrils, pushed forward his head and looked with frightened eyes at his master.

"But the horse will be ours, Lieutenant?" put in, with an inquiring tone, the sergeant.

"Dog believer! would you deprive a Christian of his horse in the steppe?"

"But it is our booty —"

Further conversation was interrupted by stronger breathing from the suffocated man.

"Pour gorailka into his mouth," said the lieutenant, undoing his belt.

"Are we to spend the night here?"

"Yes. Unsaddle the horses and make a good fire."

The soldiers hurried around quickly. Some began to rouse and rub the prostrate man; some started off for reeds to burn; others spread camel and bear skins on the ground for couches.

The lieutenant, troubling himself no more about the suffocated stranger, unbound his belt and stretched himself on a burka by the fire. He was a very young man, of spare

habit of body, dark complexion, very elegant in manner, with a delicately cut countenance and a prominent aquiline nose. In his eyes were visible desperate daring and endurance, but his face had an honest look. His rather thick mustache and a beard, evidently unshaven for a long time, gave him a seriousness beyond his years.

Meanwhile two attendants were preparing the evening meal. Dressed quarters of mutton were placed on the fire, a number of bustards and partridges were taken from the packs, and one wild goat, which an attendant began to skin without delay. The fire blazed up, casting out upon the steppe an enormous ruddy circle of light. The suffocated man began to revive slowly.

After a time he cast his bloodshot eyes around on the strangers, examining their faces; then he tried to stand up. The soldier who had previously talked with the lieutenant raised him by the armpits; another put in his hand a halbert, upon which the stranger leaned with all his force. His face was still purple, his veins swollen. At last, with a suppressed voice, he coughed out his first word, "Water!"

They gave him gorailka, which he drank repeatedly, and which appeared to do him good, for after he had removed the flask from his lips at last, he inquired in a clear voice, "In whose hands am I?"

The officer rose and approached him. "In the hands of those who saved you."

"It was not you, then, who caught me with a lariat?"

"No; the sabre is our weapon, not the lariat. You wrong our good soldiers with the suspicion. You were seized by ruffians, pretended Tartars. You can look at them if you are curious, for they are lying out there slaughtered like sheep."

Saying this, he pointed with his hand to a number of dark bodies lying below the height.

To this the stranger answered, "If you will permit me to rest."

They brought him a felt-covered saddle, on which he seated himself in silence.

He was in the prime of life, of medium height, with broad shoulders, almost gigantic build of body, and striking features. He had an enormous head, a complexion dried and sunburnt, black eyes, somewhat aslant, like those of a Tartar; over his thin lips hung a mustache ending at the tips in two broad bunches. His powerful face indicated courage and pride. There was in it something at once

attractive and repulsive, — the dignity of a hetman with Tartar cunning, kindness, and ferocity.

After he had sat awhile on the saddle he rose, and beyond all expectation, went to look at the bodies instead of returning thanks.

"How churlish!" muttered the lieutenant.

The stranger examined each face carefully, nodding his head like a man who has seen through everything; then he turned slowly to the lieutenant, slapping himself on the side, and seeking involuntarily his belt, behind which he wished evidently to pass his hand.

This importance in a man just rescued from the halter did not please the young lieutenant, and he said in irony, —

"One might say that you are looking for acquaintances among those robbers, or that you are saying a litany for their souls."

"You are both right and wrong. You are right, for I was looking for acquaintances; and you are wrong, for they are not robbers, but servants of a petty nobleman, my neighbor."

"Then it is clear that you do not drink out of the same spring with that neighbor."

A strange smile passed over the thin lips of the stranger.

"And in that you are wrong," muttered he through his teeth. In a moment he added audibly: "But pardon for not having first given thanks for the aid and effective succor which freed me from such sudden death. Your courage has redeemed my carelessness, for I separated from my men; but my gratitude is equal to your good-will."

Having said this, he reached his hand to the lieutenant.

But the haughty young man did not stir from his place, and was in no hurry to give his hand; instead of that he said, —

"I should like to know first if I have to do with a nobleman; for though I have no doubt you are one, still it does not befit me to accept the thanks of a nameless person."

"I see you have the mettle of a knight, and speak justly. I should have begun my speech and thanks with my name. I am Zenovi Abdank; my escutcheon that of Abdank with a cross; a nobleman from the province of Kieff; a landholder, and a colonel of the Cossack regiment of Prince Dominik Zaslavski."

"And I am Yan Skshetuski, lieutenant of the armored regiment of Prince Yeremi Vishnyevetski."

"You serve under a famous warrior. Accept my thanks and hand."

The lieutenant hesitated no longer. It is true that armored officers looked down on men of the other regiments; but Pan Yan was in the steppe, in the Wilderness, where such things were less remembered. Besides, he had to do with a colonel. Of this he had ocular proof, for when his soldiers brought Pan Abdank the belt and sabre which were taken from his person in order to revive him, they brought at the same time a short staff with a bone shaft and ivory head, such as Cossack colonels were in the habit of using. Besides, the dress of Zenovi Abdank was rich, and his educated speech indicated a quick mind and social training.

Pan Yan therefore invited him to supper. The odor of roasted meats began to go out from the fire just then, tickling the nostrils and the palate. The attendant brought the meats, and served them on a plate. The two men fell to eating; and when a good-sized goat-skin of Moldavian wine was brought, a lively conversation sprang up without delay.

"A safe return home to us," said Pan Yan.

"Then you are returning home? Whence, may I ask?" inquired Abdank.

"From a long journey, — from the Crimea."

"What were you doing there? Did you go with ransom?"

"No, Colonel, I went to the Khan himself."

Abdank turned an inquisitive ear. "Did you, indeed? Were you well received? And what was your errand to the Khan?"

"I carried a letter from Prince Yeremi."

"You were an envoy, then! What did the prince write to the Khan about?"

The lieutenant looked quickly at his companion.

"Well, Colonel," said he, "you have looked into the eyes of ruffians who captured you with a lariat; that is your affair. But what the prince wrote to the Khan is neither your affair nor mine, but theirs."

"I wondered, a little while ago," answered Abdank, cunningly, "that his highness the prince should send such a young man to the Khan; but after your answer I am not

astonished, for I see that you are young in years, but mature in experience and wit."

The lieutenant swallowed the smooth, flattering words, merely twisted his young mustache, and inquired, —

"Now do you tell me what you are doing on the Omelnik, and how you come to be here alone."

"I am not alone, I left my men on the road; and I am going to Kudák, to Pan Grodzitski, who is transferred to the command there, and to whom the Grand Hetman has sent me with letters."

"And why don't you go by water?"

"I am following an order from which I may not depart."

"Strange that the hetman issued such an order, when in the steppe you have fallen into straits which you would have avoided surely had you been going by water."

"Oh, the steppes are quiet at present; my acquaintance with them does not begin with to-day. What has met me is the malice and hatred of man."

"And who attacked you in this fashion?"

"It is a long story. An evil neighbor, Lieutenant, who has destroyed my property, is driving me from my land, has killed my son, and besides, as you have seen, has made an attempt on my life where we sit."

"But do you not carry a sabre at your side?"

On the powerful face of Abdank there was a gleam of hatred, in his eyes a sullen glare. He answered slowly and with emphasis, —

"I do; and as God is my aid, I shall seek no other weapon against my foes."

The lieutenant wished to say something, when suddenly the tramp of horses was heard in the steppe, or rather the hurried slapping of horses' feet on the softened grass. That moment, also, the lieutenant's orderly who was on guard hurried up with news that men of some kind were approaching.

"Those," said Abdank, "are surely my men, whom I left beyond the Tasmina. Not suspecting perfidy, I promised to wait for them here."

Soon a crowd of mounted men formed a half-circle in front of the height. By the glitter of the fire appeared heads of horses, with open nostrils, puffing from exertion; and above them the faces of riders, who, bending forward, sheltered their eyes from the glare of the fire and gazed eagerly toward the light.

"Hei! men, who are you?" inquired Abdank.

"Servants of God," answered voices from the darkness.

"Just as I thought, — my men," repeated Abdank, turning to the lieutenant. "Come this way."

Some of them dismounted and drew near the fire.

"Oh, how we hurried, batko! But what 's the matter?"

"There was an ambush. Hvedko, the traitor, learned of my coming to this place, and lurked here with others. He must have arrived some time in advance. They caught me with a lariat."

"God save us! What Poles are these about you?"

Saying this, they looked threateningly on Pan Skshetuski and his companions.

"These are kind friends," said Abdank. "Glory be to God! I am alive and well. We will push on our way at once."

"Glory be to God for that! We are ready."

The newly arrived began to warm their hands over the fire, for the night was cool, though fine. There were about forty of them, sturdy men and well armed. They did not look at all like registered Cossacks, which astonished Pan Skshetuski not a little, especially since their number was so considerable. Everything seemed very suspicious. If the Grand Hetman had sent Abdank to Kudák, he would have given him a guard of registered Cossacks; and in the second place, why should he order him to go by the steppe from Chigirin, and not by water? The necessity of crossing all the rivers flowing through the Wilderness to the Dnieper could only delay the journey. It appeared rather as if Abdank wanted to avoid Kudák.

In like manner, the personality of Abdank astonished the young lieutenant greatly. He noticed at once that the Cossacks, who were rather free in intercourse with their colonels, met him with unusual respect, as if he were a real hetman. He must be a man of a heavy hand, and what was most wonderful to Skshetuski, who knew the Ukraine on both sides of the Dnieper, he had heard nothing of a famous Abdank. Besides, there was in the countenance of the man something peculiar, — a certain secret power which breathed from his face like heat from a flame, a certain unbending will, declaring that this man withdraws before no man and no thing. The same kind of will was in the face of Prince Yeremi Vishnyevetski; but that which in the prince was an inborn gift of nature special to his lofty birth and his position might astonish one when found in a man of unknown name wandering in the wild steppe.

Pan Skshetuski[1] deliberated long. It occurred to him that this might be some powerful outlaw who, hunted by justice, had taken refuge in the Wilderness, — or the leader of a robber band; but the latter was not probable. The dress and speech of the man showed something else. The lieutenant was quite at a loss what course to take. He kept simply on his guard. Meanwhile Abdank ordered his horse.

"Lieutenant, 't is time for him to go who has the road before him. Let me thank you again for your succor. God grant me to show you a service of equal value!"

"I do not know whom I have saved, therefore I deserve no thanks."

"Your modesty, which equals your courage, is speaking now. Accept from me this ring."

The lieutenant frowned and took a step backward, measuring with his eyes Abdank, who then spoke on with almost paternal dignity in his voice and posture, —

"But look, I offer you not the wealth of this ring, but its other virtues. When still in the years of youth, a captive among infidels, I got this from a pilgrim returning from the Holy Land. In the seal of it is dust from the grave of Christ. Such a gift might not be refused, even if it came from condemned hands. You are still a young man and a soldier; and since even old age, which is near the grave, knows not what may strike it before the last hour, youth, which has before it a long life, must meet with many an adventure. This ring will preserve you from misfortune, and protect you when the day of judgment comes; and I tell you that that day is even now on the road through the Wilderness."

A moment of silence followed; nothing was heard but the crackling of the fire and the snorting of the horses. From the distant reeds came the dismal howling of wolves. Suddenly Abdank repeated still again, as if to himself, —

"The day of judgment is already on the road through the Wilderness, and when it comes all God's world will be amazed."

The lieutenant took the ring mechanically, so much was he astonished at the words of this strange man. But the man was looking into the dark distance of the steppe.

[1] The author uses Skshetuski, the family name of his hero, oftener than Yan, his Christian name, prefixing Pan = Mr. in both cases. I have taken the liberty of using Yan oftener than Skshetuski because more easily pronounced in English.

Then he turned slowly and mounted his horse. His Cossacks were waiting at the foot of the height.

"Forward! forward! Good health to you, my soldier friend!" said he to the lieutenant. "The times are such at present that brother trusts not brother. This is why you know not whom you have saved, for I have not given you my name."

"You are not Abdank, then?"

"That is my escutcheon."

"And your name?"

"Bogdan Zenovi Hmelnitski."

When he had said this, he rode down from the height, and his Cossacks moved after him. Soon they were hidden in the mist and the night. When they had gone about half a furlong, the wind bore back from them the words of the Cossack song, —

"O God, lead us forth, poor captives,
From heavy bonds,
From infidel faith,
To the bright dawn,
To quiet waters,
To a gladsome land,
To a Christian world.
Hear, O God, our prayers, —
The prayers of the hapless,
The prayers of poor captives."

The voices grew fainter by degrees, and then were melted in the wind sounding through the reeds.

CHAPTER II.

Reaching Chigirin next morning, Pan Skshetuski stopped at the house of Prince Yeremi in the town, where he was to spend some time in giving rest to his men and horses after their long journey from the Crimea, which by reason of the floods and unusually swift currents of the Dnieper had to be made by land, since no boat could make head against the stream that winter. Skshetuski himself rested awhile, and then went to Pan Zatsvilikhovski, former commissioner of the Commonwealth, — a sterling soldier, who, though he did not serve with the prince, was his confidant and friend. The lieutenant wanted to ask him if there were instructions from Lubni; but the prince had sent nothing special. He had ordered Skshetuski, in the event of a favorable answer from the Khan, to journey slowly, so that his men and horses might be in good health. The prince had the following business with the Khan: He desired the punishment of certain Tartar murzas, who had raided his estates beyond the Dnieper, and whom he himself had punished severely. The Khan had in fact given a favorable answer, — had promised to send a special envoy in the following April to punish the disobedient; and wishing to gain the good-will of so famous a warrior as the prince, he had sent him by Skshetuski a horse of noted stock and also a sable cap.

Pan Skshetuski, having acquitted himself of his mission with no small honor, the mission itself being a proof of the high favor of the prince, was greatly rejoiced at the permission to stop in Chigirin without hastening his return. But old Zatsvilikhovski was greatly annoyed by what had been taking place for some time in Chigirin. They went together to the house of Dopula, a Wallachian, who kept an inn and a wine-shop in the place. There they found a crowd of nobles, though the hour was still early; for it was a market-day, and besides there happened to be a halt of cattle driven to the camp of the royal army, which brought a multitude of people together. The nobles generally assembled in the square at Dopula's, at the so-called Bell-ringers' Corner. There were assembled tenants of the Konyetspolskis, and Chigirin officials, owners of neighboring lands,