CHAPTER IX.

NEXT morning Pan Yan woke up fresh, in good health, and cheerful. The weather was wonderful. The widely overflowed waters were wrinkled into small ripples by the warm, light breeze. The banks were in a fog, and were merged in the plain of waters in one indistinguishable level.

Jendzian, when he woke, rubbed his eyes and was frightened. He looked around with astonishment, and seeing shore nowhere, cried out, —

"Oh, for God's sake! my master, we must be out on the sea."

"It is the swollen river, not the sea," answered Pan Yan; "you will find the shores when the fog rises."

"I think we shall be travelling before long in the Turkish land."

"We shall travel there if we are ordered, but you see we are not sailing alone."

And in the twinkle of an eye were to be seen many large boats and the narrow Cossack craft, generally called chaiki, with bulrushes fastened around them. Some of these were going down the river, borne on by the swift current; others were being urged laboriously against the stream with oars and sail. They were carrying fish, wax, salt, and dried cherries to towns along the river, or returning from inhabited neighborhoods laden with provisions for Kudák, and goods which found ready sale in the bazaar at the Saitch. From the mouth of the Psel down the banks of the Dnieper was a perfect desert, on which only here and there wintering-posts of the Cossacks whitened. But the river formed a highway connecting the Saitch with the rest of the world; therefore there was a considerable movement on it, especially when the increase of water made it easy for vessels, and when the Cataracts, with the exception of Nenasytets, were passable for craft going with the current.

The lieutenant looked with curiosity at that life on the river. Meanwhile his boats were speeding on quickly to Kudák. The fog rose, and the shore appeared in clear outline. Over the heads of the travellers flew millions of water-birds, — pelicans, wild geese, storks, ducks, gulls,

curlews, and mews. In the reeds at the side of the river was heard such an uproar, such a plashing of water, such a sound of wings, that you would have said there was either a war or a council of birds. Beyond Kremenchug the shores became lower and open.

"Oh, look, my master!" cried Jendzian, suddenly; "the sun is roasting, but snow lies on the fields."

Skshetuski looked, and indeed on both sides of the river, as far as the eye could reach, some kind of a white covering glittered in the rays of the sun.

"Hallo! what is that which looks white over there?" asked he of the pilot.

"Cherry-trees!" answered the old man.

In fact there were forests of dwarf cherry-trees, with which both shores were covered from beyond the mouth of the Psel. In autumn the sweet and large fruit of these trees furnished food to birds and beasts, as well as to people losing their way in the Wilderness. This fruit was also an article of commerce which was taken in boats to Kieff and beyond. When they went to the shore, to give the oarsmen time to rest, the lieutenant landed with Jendzian, wishing to examine the bushes more closely. The two men were surrounded by such an intoxicating odor that they were scarcely able to breathe. Many branches were lying on the ground. In places an impenetrable thicket was formed. Among the cherry-trees were growing, also luxuriantly, small wild almond-trees covered with rose-colored blossoms, which gave out a still more pungent odor. Myriads of black bees and yellow bees, with many-colored butterflies, were flitting over this variegated sea of blossoms, the end of which could not be seen.

"Oh, this is wonderful, wonderful!" said Jendzian. "And why do not people live here? I see plenty of wild animals too."

Among the cherry-trees gray and white rabbits were running, and countless flocks of large blue-legged quails, some of which Jendzian shot; but to his great distress he learned from the pilot that their flesh was poisonous. On the soft earth tracks of deer and wild goats were to be seen, and from afar came sounds like the grunting of wild boars.

When the travellers had sated their eyes and rested, they pushed on farther. The shores were now high, now low, disclosing views of fine oak forests, fields, mounds, and spacious steppes. The surrounding country seemed so

luxuriant that Skshetuski involuntarily repeated to himself the question of Jendzian: "Why do not people live here?" But for this there was need of some second Yeremi Vishnyevetski to occupy those desert places, bring them to order, and defend them from attacks of Tartars and men from the lower country. At points the river made breaches and bends, flooded ravines, struck its foaming wave against cliffs on the shore, and filled with water dark caverns in the rocks. In such caverns and bends were the hiding-places and retreats of the Cossacks. The mouths of rivers were covered with forests of rushes, reeds, and plants, which were black from the multitude of birds; in a word, a wild region, precipitous, in places sunken, but waste and mysterious, unrolled itself before the eyes of our travellers. Movement on the water became disagreeable; for by reason of the heat swarms of mosquitoes and insects unknown in the dry steppe appeared, — some of them as large as a man's finger, and whose bite caused blood to flow in a stream.

In the evening they arrived at the island of Romanovka, the fires of which were visible from a distance, and there they remained for the night. The fishermen who had hurried up to look at the escort of the lieutenant had their shirts, their faces, and their hands entirely covered with tar to save them from insect bites. These were men of rude habits and wild. In spring they assembled here in crowds to catch and dry fish, which afterward they took to Chigirin, Cherkasi, Pereyasláv, and Kieff. Their occupation was difficult, but profitable, by reason of the multitude of fish that in the summer became a misfortune to that region; for, dying from lack of water in the bays and so-called "quiet corners," they infected the air with putrefaction.

The lieutenant learned that all the Zaporojians occupied there in fishing had left the island some days before and returned at the call of the koshevoi ataman. Every night, too, from the island were seen fires kindled on the steppe by people hastening to the Saitch. The fishermen knew that an expedition against the Poles was in preparation, and they made no secret of this from the lieutenant. Skshetuski saw that his journey might indeed be too late; perhaps before he could reach the Saitch the Cossack regiments would be moving to the north; but he had been ordered to go, and like a true soldier he did not argue, but resolved to push on, even to the centre of the Zaporojian camp.

Early next morning they kept on their way. They

passed the wonderful Tarenski Corner, Sukhaya Gora, and Konski Ostrog, famous for its swamps and myriads of insects, which rendered it unfit for habitation. Everything about them — the wildness of the region, the increased rush of the water — announced the vicinity of the Cataracts. At last the tower of Kudák was outlined on the horizon; the first part of their journey was ended.

The lieutenant, however, did not reach the castle that night; for Pan Grodzitski had established the order that after the change of guard, just before sunset, no one would be permitted to enter the fortress or leave it. Even if the king himself were to arrive after that hour, he would be obliged to pass the night in the village under the walls of the castle.

And this is what the lieutenant did. His lodgings were not very commodious; for the cabins in the village, of which there were about sixty, built of clay, were so small that it was necessary to crawl into some of them on hands and knees. It was not worth while to build any other; for the fortress reduced them to ruins at every Tartar attack, so as not to give the assailants shelter or safe approach to the walls. In that village dwelt "incomers," — that is, wanderers from Poland, Russia, the Crimea, and Wallachia. Almost every man had a faith of his own, but of that no one raised a question. They cultivated no land because of danger from the horde. They lived on fish and grain brought from the Ukraine; they drank spirits distilled from millet, and worked at handicraft for which they were esteemed at Kudák.

The lieutenant was scarcely able to close his eyes that night from the odor of horse-skins, of which straps were made in the village. Next morning at daybreak, as soon as the bell rang and the tattoo was sounded, he gave notice at the fortress that an envoy of the prince had arrived.

Grodzitski, who had the visit of the prince fresh in mind, went out to meet him in person. He was a man fifty years of age, one-eyed like a cyclops, sullen; for, seated in a desert at the end of the world and not seeing people, he had become wild, and in exercising unlimited power had grown stern and harsh. Besides, his face was pitted with small-pox, and adorned with sabre-cuts and scars from Tartar arrows, like white spots on a tawny skin. But he was a genuine soldier, watchful as a stork; he kept his eye strained in the direction of Tartars and Cossacks. He

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drank only water, and slept but seven hours in twenty-four; often he would spring up in the night to see if the guards were watching the walls properly, and for the least carelessness condemned soldiers to death. Though terrible, he was indulgent to the Cossacks, and acquired their respect. When in winter they were short of provisions in the Saitch, he helped them with grain. He was a Russian like those who in their day campaigned in the steppes with Psheslav, Lantskoronski, and Samek Zborovski.

"Then you are going to the Saitch?" asked he of Skshetuski, conducting him first to the castle and treating him hospitably.

"To the Saitch. What news have you from there?"

"War! The koshevoi ataman is concentrating the Cossacks from all the meadows, streams, and islands. Fugitives are coming from the Ukraine, whom I stop when I can. There are thirty thousand men or more in the Saitch at present. When they move on the Ukraine and when the town Cossacks and the crowd join them, there will be a hundred thousand."

"And Hmelnitski?"

"He is looked for every day from the Crimea with the Tartars; he may have come already. To tell the truth, it is not necessary for you to go to the Saitch; in a little while you will see them here, for they will not avoid Kudák, nor leave it behind them."

"But will you defend yourself?"

Grodzitski looked gloomily at the lieutenant and said with a calm, emphatic voice: "I will not defend myself."

"How is that?"

"I have no powder. I sent twenty boats for even a little; none has been sent me. I don't know whether the messengers were intercepted or whether there is none. I only know that so far none has come. I have powder for two weeks, — no longer. If I had powder enough, I should blow Kudák and myself into the air before a Cossack foot should enter. I am commanded to lie here, — I lie; commanded to watch, — I watch; commanded to be defiant, — I am defiant; and if it comes to dying, since my mother gave me birth, I shall know how to die too."

"And can't you make powder yourself?"

"For two months the Cossacks have been unwilling to let me have saltpetre, which must be brought from the Black Sea. No matter! if need be I will die!"

"We can all learn of you old soldiers. And if you were to go for the powder yourself?"

"I will not and cannot leave Kudák; here was life for me, let my death be here. Don't you think, either, that you are going to banquets and lordly receptions, like those with which they welcome envoys in other places, or that the office of envoy will protect you there. They kill their own atamans; and since I have been here I don't remember that any of them has died a natural death. And you will perish also."

Skshetuski was silent.

"I see that your courage is dying out; you would better not go."

"My dear sir," said the lieutenant, angrily, "think of something more fitted to frighten me, for I have heard what you have told me ten times, and if you counsel me not to go I shall see that in my place you would not go. Consider, therefore, if powder is the only thing you need, and not bravery too, in the defence of Kudák."

Grodzitski, instead of growing angry, looked with clear eyes at the lieutenant.

"You are a biting dog!" muttered he in Russian. "Pardon me. From your answer I see that you are able to uphold the dignity of the prince and the rank of noble. I'll give you a couple of Cossack boats, for with your own you will not be able to pass the Cataracts."

"I wished to ask you for them."

"At Nenasytets you will have them drawn overland; for although the water is deep, it is never possible to pass, — scarcely can some kind of small boat slip through. And when you are on the lower waters guard against surprise, and remember that iron and lead are more eloquent than words. There they respect none but the daring. The boats will be ready in the morning; but I will order a second rudder to be put on each, for one is not enough on the Cataracts."

Grodzitski now conducted the lieutenant from the room, to show him the fortress and its arrangements. It was a model of order and discipline throughout. Night and day guards standing close to one another watched the walls, which Tartar captives were forced to strengthen and repair continually.

"Every year I add one ell to the height of the walls," said Grodzitski, "and they are now so strong that if I had pow-

der enough even a hundred thousand men could do nothing against me; but without ammunition I can't defend myself when superior force appears."

The fortress was really impregnable; for besides the guns it was defended by the precipices of the Dnieper and inaccessible cliffs rising sheer from the water, and did not require a great garrison. Therefore there were not more than six hundred men in the fortress; but they were the very choicest soldiers, armed with muskets. The Dnieper, flowing in that place in a compressed bed, was so narrow that an arrow shot from the walls went far on to the other bank. The guns of the fortress commanded both shores and the whole neighborhood. Besides, about two miles and a half from the fortress was a lofty tower, from which everything was visible for forty miles around, and in which were one hundred soldiers whom Pan Grodzitski visited every day. Whenever they saw people in the neighborhood they gave signal to the fortress immediately, the alarm was rung, and the whole garrison stood under arms at once.

"In truth," said Grodzitski, "there is no week without an alarm; for the Tartars, sometimes several thousands strong, wander around like wolves. We strike them as well as we can with the guns, and many times wild horses are mistaken for Tartars."

"And are you not weary of living in such a wild place?" asked Skshetuski.

"Even if a place were given me in the chambers of the king, I would not take it. I see more of the world from this place than the king does from his windows in Warsaw."

In truth, from the walls an immense stretch of steppes was to be seen, which at that time seemed one sea of green, — to the north the mouth of the Samara; and on the south the whole bank of the Dnieper, rocks, precipices, forests, as far as the foam of the second Cataract, the Sur.

Toward evening they visited the tower again, since Skshetuski, seeing for the first time that fortress in the steppe, was curious about everything. Meanwhile in the village boats were being prepared for him, which, provided with rudders at both ends, could be turned more easily. He was to start early in the morning; yet during the night he did not lie down to sleep at all, but pondered what was to be done in face of the inevitable destruction with which his mission to the terrible Saitch was threatened. Life smiled on him in-

deed; for he was young and in love, and a future at the side of a loved one was promised him. Still honor and glory were dearer. But he remembered that war was near; that Helena, waiting for him in Rozlogi, might be seized by the most terrible misfortune, — exposed to the violence, not of Bogun alone, but of the wild and unbridled mob. Alarm for her and pain had seized his spirits. The steppes must have become dry already; it was surely possible to go from Rozlogi to Lubni. But he had told Helena and the old princess to wait for him; for he had not expected that the storm would burst so soon, he did not know the danger in the journey to the Saitch. He walked therefore with quick steps in his room in the fortress, twisted his beard, and wrung his hands. What was he to do? How was he to act? In his mind he saw Rozlogi already in flames, surrounded by a howling mob, more like devils than men. His own steps were answered by a gloomy echo under the vault of the castle; and it seemed to him that an evil power was already approaching Helena. On the walls the quenching of the lights was signalled, and that seemed to him the echo of Bogun's horn. He gnashed his teeth, and grasped after the hilt of his sword. Oh! why did he insist on this expedition, and get it away from Bykhovets?

Jendzian, who was sleeping on the threshold, noticed the change in his master, rose therefore, wiped his eyes, snuffed the torch burning in the iron candlestick, and began to walk around in the room, wishing to arrest the attention of his master.

But the lieutenant, buried completely in his own painful thoughts, kept walking on, rousing with his steps the slumbering echoes.

"Oh, my master!" said Jendzian.

Skshetuski gazed at him with a glassy look. Suddenly he woke up from his revery.

"Jendzian, are you afraid of death?" asked he.

"How death? What are you saying?"

"For who goes to the Saitch does not return."

"Then why do you go?"

"That is my affair; do not meddle with it. But I am sorry for you; you are a stripling, and though a cunning fellow, cunning cannot save you in the Saitch. Return to Chigirin, and then to Lubni."

Jendzian began to scratch his head.

"My master, I fear death; for whoever would not fear

death would not fear God; for it is his will either to keep a man alive or to put him to death. But if you run to death of your own will, then it is your sin as a master, not mine as a servant. I will not leave you; for I am not a serf, but a nobleman; though poor, still I am not without pride."

"I see that you are a good fellow; but I will tell you, if you do not wish to go willingly, you will go by command, since it cannot be otherwise."

"Though you were to kill me, I will not go. Do you think that I am a Judas, to give you up to death?"

Here Jendzian raised his hands to his eyes, and began to sob audibly. Skshetuski saw that he could not reach him in that way, and he did not wish to command him threateningly, for he was sorry for the lad.

"Listen!" said he to him. "You can give me no assistance, and I shall not put my head under the sword voluntarily. You will take letters to Rozlogi, which are of more importance to me than my own life. You will tell the old princess to take the young lady to Lubni at once, without the least delay, otherwise rebellion will catch them; and do you watch to see they go. I give you an important mission, worthy of a friend, not a servant."

"You can send somebody else with the letter, — anybody will go."

"And what trusted person have I here? Have you lost your senses? I repeat to you: Doubly save my life, and still you do not wish to render me such service, while I am living in torment, thinking what may happen, and my skin is sweating from pain."

"Well, as God lives, I see I must go! But I grieve for you; so if you were even to give me that spotted belt, I should take no comfort in it at all."

"You shall have the belt; but do your work well."

"I do not want the belt, if you will only let me go with you."

"To-morrow you will return with the boat which Pan Grodzitski is sending to Chigirin. From there you will go, without delay or rest, straight to Rozlogi. Here is a purse for the road. I will write letters immediately."

Jendzian fell at the feet of the lieutenant. "Oh, my master, shall I never see you again?"

"As God gives, as God gives," said Skshetuski, raising him up. "But show a glad face in Rozlogi. Now go to sleep."

The remainder of the night passed for Skshetuski in writing letters and ardent prayer, after which the angel of rest came to him. Meanwhile the night was growing pale; light whitened the narrow windows from the east; day was coming. Then rosy gleams stole into the room; on the tower and fortress they began to play the morning "tattoo." Shortly after Grodzitski appeared in the room.

"The boats are ready."

"And I am ready," said Skshetuski, calmly.