

The seconds looked uneasily on the broad breast of the Cossack, on the great muscles visible from under the rolled-up sleeve, like knots and cords. It seemed as though a little cock had stood up to fight with a powerful falcon of the steppes. The nostrils of Bogun were distended as if snuffing blood in advance; his face was so contracted that his dark foretop seemed to touch his brow, and the sabre quivered in his hand; he fixed his eyes rapaciously on his opponent and waited the word.

Volodyovski looked once more through the light at the edge of his sword, moved his little yellow mustache, and stood in position.

"There will be straight cuts here," muttered Kushel to Selitski.

Meanwhile the voice of Zagloba, slightly trembling, said: "In the name of God, begin!"

CHAPTER XLV.

THE sabres whistled; edge clashed against edge. The place of conflict was shifted at once; for Bogun pressed on with such fury that Volodyovski sprang back a number of steps, and the seconds had to retreat too. The lightning zigzags of Bogun's sword were so swift that the astonished eyes of those present could not follow them. It seemed to them that Volodyovski was altogether surrounded and covered, and that God alone could snatch him from beneath that storm of thunderbolts. The blows were mingled in one uninterrupted whistle; the rush of the moving air struck all faces. The fury of the Cossack increased; the wild rage of conflict seized him, and like a hurricane he pushed Volodyovski before him. The little knight retreated continually, and merely defended himself. His extended right arm scarcely moved; only his hand described, without stopping, circles narrow but swift as thought, and caught the raging blows of Bogun. He put edge under edge, warded off and again defended and still retreated, fixed his eyes on the eyes of the Cossack, and in the midst of serpentine lightnings appeared calm; but on his cheeks purple spots were coming out. Zagloba closed his eyes, and heard nothing but blow after blow, bite after bite.

"He defends himself yet," thought he.

"He defends himself yet," said the Selitskis and Kushel.

"He is already pushed to the sand-bank," added Kushel, quietly.

Zagloba opened his eyes again and looked. True, Volodyovski was pushed to the bank; but evidently he was not wounded yet. The flush on his face had become deeper, and drops of sweat were on his forehead.

Zagloba's heart began to beat with hope. "Pan Michael is a master beyond masters," thought he, "and this fellow will become tired at last."

In fact Bogun's face had grown pale, sweat stood in drops on his forehead; but resistance only roused his rage, foam shone from under his mustache, and from his breast came the hoarseness of fury.

Volodyovski did not let him out of sight, and defended himself continually. Suddenly, feeling the sand-bank be-

hind, he collected himself. It seemed to the spectators that he had fallen; meanwhile he bent, shrunk up, half squatted, and hurled his whole body as if it were a stone against the breast of the Cossack.

"He is attacking!" shouted Zagloba.

"He is attacking!" repeated the others.

So he was, in fact. The Cossack retreated now; and the little knight, having discovered the whole power of his opponent, pushed on him so briskly that the breath stopped in the breasts of the seconds. Evidently he began to warm up; his little eyes shot sparks; he squatted, he sprang, he changed position in a moment, he described circles around the Cossack, and forced him to turn where he stood.

"Oh, masterly, masterly!" said Zagloba.

"You will perish!" said Bogun, all at once.

"You will perish!" answered, like an echo, Volodyovski.

At that moment the Cossack threw his sabre from his right to his left hand, — a feat possible only to the ablest fencers, — and gave with his left hand such a terrible blow that Volodyovski fell to the ground as if struck by lightning.

"Jesus, Mary!" screamed Zagloba.

But Volodyovski had fallen on purpose, so that the sabre of Bogun might meet only air. Then the little knight sprang up like a wildcat, and with almost the whole length of his blade cut terribly into the open breast of the Cossack.

Bogun tottered, advanced a step, and with a last effort gave the last thrust. Volodyovski warded it off with ease, and struck still twice on the inclined head. The sabre dropped from the powerless hands of Bogun, and he fell with his face on the sand, which immediately reddened under him in a broad pool of blood.

Eliassenko, present at the duel, rushed to the body of the ataman. The seconds were unable to utter a word for some time. Pan Michael too was silent; he rested both hands on his sabre and panted heavily.

Zagloba first broke the silence. "Pan Michael, come to my embrace!" said he, with emotion.

Then they surrounded him in a circle. "You are a swordsman of the first water. May the bullets strike you!" said the Selitskis.

"You are a deceitful rogue, I see," said Kharlamp; "but I'll meet you, lest it be said that I am afraid. But though you were to slash me in such fashion as this, still I congratulate you."

"And you should put yourself at rest, for in fact you have nothing to fight about," said Zagloba.

"Impossible!" answered the light-horseman, "for it is a question here of my reputation, for which I am glad to give my life."

"I have no claim on your life. It is better to drop the matter; for to tell you the truth, I have not come in your way as you imagine. Some other man better than I will stand in your way, but not I."

"Is that true?"

"My knightly word for it."

"Then make peace with each other," cried the Selitskis and Kushel.

"Let it be so," said Kharlamp, opening his arms.

Volodyovski fell into them, and the two men kissed each other till the echoes resounded along the bank.

Kushel said: "I did not think that you could beat such a giant; and he knew too how to use a sabre."

"I had no idea that he was such a swordsman. Where could he have learned?"

Here the attention of all was directed again to the prostrate chief, whom at that time Eliassenko had turned on his back and was looking with tears for signs of life in him. It was impossible to recognize the features of Bogun, for they were covered with streaks of blood which flowed out of the wounds in his head and which immediately grew stiff in the chill air. The shirt on his breast was all in blood, but he still gave signs of life. Seemingly he was in his last agonies; his feet quivered, and his fingers hooked convulsively like claws in the sand.

Zagloba looked and waved his hand. "He has had his fill; he is parting with the world."

"Ah," said one of the Selitskis, looking at the body, "that's a corpse already!"

"Yes, for he is almost cut into bits."

"He was no common knight," muttered Volodyovski, nodding his head.

"I know something of that," added Zagloba.

Meanwhile Eliassenko tried to raise up and carry away the unfortunate ataman; but being rather a slender man and not young, and since Bogun belonged almost to the giants, he could not. It was some distance to the inn, and Bogun might die at any moment. The essaul, seeing this, turned to the nobles.

"Gentlemen," said he, clasping his hands, "for the sake

of the Saviour and the Holy Most Pure, help me! Do not let him die here like a dog! I am old, not strong enough, and the men are far away."

The nobles looked at one another. Animosity against Bogun had vanished from every heart.

"True, it is hard to leave him here like a dog," muttered Zagloba. "Since we met him in a duel, he is no longer a peasant for us, but a soldier, to whom such assistance is due. Who will carry him with me, gentlemen?"

"I," said Volodyovski.

"Then carry him on my burka," added Kharlamp.

In a moment Bogun was lying on the mantle, the ends of which Zagloba, Volodyovski, Kushel, and Eliassenko held; and the whole party, in company with Kharlamp and the Selitskis, moved with slow steps toward the inn.

"He has a firm life," said Zagloba; "he is moving yet. My God, if any man had told me that I should become his nurse and carry him in this fashion, I should have thought that he was trifling with me. I have too feeling a heart, I know that myself; but life is cruel. I'll dress his wounds too. I hope we shall meet no more in this world; let him remember me kindly in the next."

"Then you think that he will not recover by any means?" asked Kharlamp.

"He! I would n't give a wisp of old straw for his life. Such was his fate, and he could not escape it; for even if he had succeeded with Pan Volodyovski, he would n't have escaped my hands. But I prefer that it has happened as it has, for already there is an outcry against me as a merciless slaughterer. And what am I to do when a man crawls into my way? I had to pay Pan Dunchovski five hundred sequins' fine, and you know, gentlemen, that estates in Russia give no income now."

"True, for they have plundered you there to the last," said Kharlamp.

"Oh, this Cossack is heavy!" said Zagloba; "I've lost my breath. — Plundered us, yes, plundered; but I hope the Diet will make some provision, otherwise we are reduced to death. But he is heavy, he is heavy! See, the blood is beginning to run again! Hurry, Pan Kharlamp, to the inn; let the Jew mix some dough with spider-web. It won't help the dead man much, but care is a Christian act, and it will be easier for him to die. Hurry, Pan Kharlamp!"

Kharlamp pushed ahead; and when at last they carried the chief into the room, Zagloba betook himself, with great

knowledge of the art and expertness, to dressing him. He stopped the blood, closed the wounds, then turned to Eliassenko and said, —

"You, grandfather, are not needed here. Ride with all speed to Zaborovo, ask to be placed before the prince, deliver the letter, and tell what you saw, everything as it was. If you lie, I shall know, for I am a confidant of his Highness the Prince, and I shall command your head to be cut off. Give my respects to Hmelnitski, for he knows and loves me. We will give a fitting funeral to your ataman. You do your own work; do not loiter in corners, or some one will settle you before you can tell who you are. Be in good health, and be off!"

"Let me stay, gentlemen, even till he gets cold."

"Be off, I tell you!" said Zagloba, threateningly; "if not, I'll order the peasants to take you to Zaborovo. And my respects to Hmelnitski."

Eliassenko bowed to the girdle and went out. Zagloba said again to Kharlamp and the Selitskis, —

"I've got that Cossack off; for what has he to do here, and if some one should kill him, which might easily happen, then the blame would be laid on us. The partisans of Zaslavski and the curs of the chancellor would be first to roar with all their might that in spite of God's law Vishnyevetski's men murdered the whole Cossack embassy. But a wise head has a remedy for everything. We won't let ourselves be eaten in kasha by these fops, these parasites; and when necessary you, gentlemen, will bear witness how it all happened, and that he challenged us himself. I must order the bailiff of this place to bury him somehow. They don't know here who he was; they will think that he was a noble, and bury him decently. It's time for us too to be on the road, Pan Michael, for we have a report to make to the prince yet."

The hoarse breathing of Bogun interrupted these words.

"Oh, the soul is seeking a way for itself," said Zagloba.

"It is getting dark, and the spirit will go groping to the other world. But since he put no shame on our young lady, may God give him eternal rest, — amen! Let us go, Pan Michael. From my heart I forgive him all his sins, though to tell the truth, I put myself more in his way than he put himself in mine. But the end has come. Gentlemen, I wish you good health. It was a delight to make the acquaintance of such honorable men, but remember to testify in case of need."

CHAPTER XLVI.

PRINCE YEREMI heard of the slaying of Bogun with notable indifference, especially when he learned that there were men outside his regiments who were ready at any moment to testify that Volodyovski had been challenged. If the affair had not happened just before the announcement of Yan Kazimir's election, if the struggle of the candidates had been still going on, the opponents of Yeremi and at their head the chancellor would certainly not have failed to forge weapons against him out of this event, in spite of all witnesses and testimony. But after Prince Karl's withdrawal, men's minds were occupied with other things, and it was easy to foresee that the whole affair would be drowned in oblivion. Hmelnitski, it is true, might raise it to show what new injuries he was enduring every day; but Yeremi justly hoped that Prince Kazimir in sending his answer would order it to be stated from himself how the envoy had perished, and Hmelnitski would not dare to doubt the truth of the prince's words.

Yeremi was anxious only that no political disturbance should rise through his soldiers. On the other hand he was glad, on Skshetuski's account, of what had happened, for the finding of Kurtsevichovna was really much more likely now. It was possible to find her, to rescue or ransom her; and the prince would surely not spare the outlay, no matter how great, if only he could save his favorite knight from suffering and restore his happiness.

Volodyovski went to the prince in great apprehension; for though in general he had little timidity, still he feared as he did fire every frown of the voevoda's brow. What was his astonishment then and joy when the prince, after he had heard the report and meditated awhile on what had happened, took a costly ring from his finger and said, —

"I praise your moderation for not attacking him first, for a great and harmful uproar might have arisen at the Diet from that. But if the princess shall be found, Skshetuski will be indebted to you for life. Reports reach me, Volodyovski, that as others are unable to keep their tongues behind their lips, you are unable to keep your sabre in its scabbard, for which punishment is due you. But since you

took the part of a friend and sustained the reputation of our regiments with such a famous hero, take this ring, so as to have some memento of this day. I knew that you were a good soldier and famous at the sword, but this is like a master of masters."

"He!" said Zagloba. "He would cut the devil's horns off at the third round. If your Highness should ever have my head cut off, then I ask that no one else cut it but him, for at least I should go to the other world straightway. He cut Bogun in two in the breast, and then passed twice through his wits."

The prince was fond of knightly affairs and good soldiers; he smiled therefore with pleasure and asked: "Have you ever found your match at the sabre?"

"Skshetuski hacked me a little once, but I paid him back the time your Highness put us both behind the bars. Among others Pan Podbipienta might meet me, for he has power beyond human; and Kushel almost, if he had better eyes."

"Don't believe him, your Highness! no man can stand before him."

"And Bogun fought long?"

"I had grievous work. He knew how to throw the sabre from the right to the left hand."

"Bogun told me himself," interrupted Zagloba, "that he fought with the Kurtsevichi whole days for practice, and I saw myself how he did the same with others in Chigirin."

"Do you know what you would better do, Volodyovski?" said the prince, with pretended seriousness; "go to Zamost, challenge Hmelnitski, and with one blow free the Commonwealth from all its defeats and anxieties."

"I will go at your Highness's order, if Hmelnitski wishes to meet me," answered Volodyovski.

To which the prince answered: "We are joking, and the world is perishing! But you, gentlemen, must really go to Zamost. I have news from the Cossack camp that the moment Prince Kazimir's election is declared, Hmelnitski will raise the siege and withdraw to Russia, which he will do from real or simulated affection for the king, or because his power might more easily be broken at Zamost. Therefore you must go and tell Skshetuski what has happened, so that he may set out to look for the princess. Tell him to choose from my squadrons with the starosta

of Valets as many soldiers as may be necessary for the expedition. Besides, I shall send him permission by you and give him a letter, for his happiness is very near my heart."

"Your Highness, you are a father to us all; therefore we desire to remain in faithful service to you while we live."

"I am not sure that my service will not soon be a hungry one," said the prince, "if all my fortune beyond the Dnieper is lost; but while it lasts, what is mine is yours."

"Oh," cried Volodyovski, "our poor fortunes will always be at the disposal of your Highness."

"And mine with the rest," added Zagloba.

"That is not necessary yet," answered the prince, kindly. "I still entertain the hope, that if I lose everything the Commonwealth will at least remember my children."

Speaking thus, the prince seemed to have a moment of second sight. The Commonwealth in fact a few years later gave to his only son the best it had, — that is, the crown; but at that time the gigantic fortune of Yeremi was really shattered.

"Well, we got out of it," said Zagloba, when both had left the prince. "Pan Michael, you may be sure of promotion. But let us see the ring. Upon my word, it is worth about one hundred ducats, for the stone is very beautiful. Ask any Armenian in the bazaar to-morrow. For such an amount we might swim in eating and drinking and other delights. What do you think, Pan Michael? The soldier's maxim is: 'To-day I live, to-morrow decay;' and the sense of it is this, — that it isn't worth while to think of to-morrow. Short is the life of man, Pan Michael. The great thing is this, that henceforth the prince will carry you in his heart. He would give ten times as much to make a present of Bogun to Skshetuski, and you have done it. You may expect great favors, believe me! Are the villages few that the prince has given to knights for life, or made presents of outright? What is such a ring as this? Surely some income will fall to you, and to wind up, the prince will give you one of his relatives in marriage."

Pan Michael jumped up. "How do you know that —"

"That what?"

"I wanted to say, what have you got in your head? How could such a thing take place?"

"But does it not take place? Are you not a noble, or are not all nobles equal? Are the distant relatives, male and female, of every magnate among the nobles few in number? These relatives he gives in marriage to his most important men. Very likely Sufchinski of Senchy married some distant relative of the Vishnyevetskis. Though some of us serve, we are all brothers, Pan Michael, — all brothers, since we are all descended in common from Japhet, and the whole difference is in fortune and offices to which each may arrive. There are likely enough in some other countries considerable differences between nobles, but they are many nobles. I understand differences between dogs; there are, for instance, pointers, and there are hounds of various kinds. But consider, Pan Michael, it cannot be so among nobles; for then we should be dog-brothers, not nobles, — which disgrace to such an honorable order Thou wilt not permit, O Lord!"

"You speak truly," said Volodyovski; "but then the Vishnyevetskis are kingly stock, almost."

"Ah, Pan Michael, just as if you are not eligible to the throne! I, first of all, would vote for you, if I should make up my mind like Pan Sigismund Skarshevski, who swears that he will vote for himself unless he is ruined at dice. Everything, thank God, with us is obtained by free vote; our poverty, not our birth, stands in the way."

"That's the case precisely," sighed Pan Michael.

"What's to be done? We are plundered to the last; and we shall be lost if the Commonwealth does n't provide some income for us," said Zagloba, "and we shall perish miserably. What wonder is it if a man, though by nature abstemious, should like to get drunk under such oppressions? Let us go, Pan Michael, and drink a glass of small beer; we shall comfort ourselves even a little."

Thus conversing, they reached the old town and entered a wine-shop, before which a number of attendants were holding the shubas and burkas of nobles who were drinking inside. Having seated themselves before a table, they ordered a decanter and began to take counsel as to what they should do now, after the killing of Bogun.

"If Hmelnitski should leave Zamost and peace follow, then the princess is ours," said Zagloba.

"We must go to Skshetuski at once, and not let him off till he finds the girl."

"True, we will go at once; but now there is no way of getting to Zamost."

"That's all the same, if only God will favor us later."
Zagloba raised his glass. "He will, he will," said he.
"Do you know, Pan Michael, what I'll tell you?"

"What is it?"

"Bogun is killed."

Volodyovski looked at him with astonishment. "Yes; who should know that better than I?"

"May your hands be holy! you know and I know. I saw how you fought; you are now before my eyes, and still I must repeat it to myself continually, for at times it seems as though I had only some kind of a dream. What a care has been removed! what a knot your sabre cut! May the bullets strike you! for God knows, this is too great to be told. No, I cannot restrain myself; let me press you once again, Pan Michael. If you will believe, when I made your acquaintance I thought to myself: 'There is a little whipper-snapper.' A nice whipper-snapper, to slash Bogun in this fashion! Bogun is gone; no trace, no ashes of him, — slain to death for the ages of ages; amen!"

Here Zagloba began to hug and kiss Volodyovski, and Pan Michael was moved to tears as if sorry for Bogun. At last, however, he freed himself from Zagloba's embraces and said: "We were not present at his death, and he is hard to kill. Suppose he recovers?"

"Oh, in God's name, what are you talking about?" said Zagloba. "I should be ready to go to-morrow to Lipki and arrange the nicest funeral for him, just after his death."

"Why should you go? You would n't finish a wounded man. After the sabre, whoever does not yield his breath at once is likely to pull through. A sabre is not a bullet."

"He cannot recover. He was already in the death-agony when we left. No chance of recovery! I examined his wounds myself. Let him rest, for you cut him open like a hare. We must go to Skshetuski at once and comfort him, or he may die of gnawing grief."

"Or he will become a monk; he told me so himself."

"What wonder? I should do the same in his place. I do not know a more honorable knight, and a more unhappy one I do not know. The Lord visits him grievously."

"Leave off," said Volodyovski, a little drunk, "for I am not able to stop my tears."

"Neither am I," added Zagloba; "such an honorable

knight, and such a soldier! But the princess—you do not know her; such a darling!"

Here Zagloba began to howl in a low bass, for he really loved the princess; and Pan Michael accompanied him in a higher key, and they drank wine mixed with tears. Then, dropping their heads on their breasts, they sat for a time gloomily, till Zagloba struck his fist on the table.

"Pan Michael, why do we weep? Bogun is killed!"

"True," said Volodyovski.

"We ought rather to rejoice. We are fools now if we don't find her."

"Let us go," said Volodyovski, rising.

"Let us drink," corrected Zagloba. "God grant us to hold their children at the christening, and all because we slew Bogun."

"Served him right!" finished Volodyovski, not noticing that Zagloba was already sharing with him the merit of killing Bogun.