BOGDAN HMELNITSKI.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE commissioners sent by the Commonwealth to negotiate with Hmelnitski forced their way through the greatest difficulties to Novoselki, and there halted, waiting an answer from the victorious hetman, who was stopping at that time in Chigirin. They were gloomy and depressed; for death had threatened them continually during the whole journey, and difficulties increased at every step. Day and night they were surrounded by crowds of the populace, made wild to the last degree by slaughter and war, and who were howling for the death of the commissioners. From time to time they met bands, commanded by no one, formed of robbers or wild herdsmen, without the least idea of the laws of nations, but hungry for blood and plunder. The commissioners had, it is true, a hundred horse as attendants, led by Pan Bryshovski; besides this, Hmelnitski himself, foreseeing what might meet them, sent Colonel Donyéts, with four hundred Cossacks; but that escort might easily prove inadequate, for the throngs of wild men were increasing in number each hour, and assuming a more threatening attitude. If one of the convoy or the attendants separated, even for a moment, from the company, he perished without a trace. They were like a handful of travellers surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves; and thus passed for them whole days, weeks, till at the stopping-place in Novoselki it appeared to all that their last hour had come. The convoy of dragoons and the escort of Donyéts, from evening on, fought a regular battle for the life of the commissioners, who, repeating the prayers for the dying, committed their souls to God. The Carmelite Lentovski gave them absolution, one after another, while outside the window with the blowing of the wind came terrible shouts, the report of shots, hellish laughter, the clatter of scythes, and shouts of "Death to them!" and demands for the head of the voevoda Kisel, who was the main object of their rage.

It was an awful night, and long, for it was a winter night. Kisel rested his head on his hands, and sat motionless for many hours. It was not death that he feared; for since he left Gushchi he was so exhausted, tortured, deprived

of sleep, that he would have extended his hands with gladness to death; but endless despair was covering his soul. He as a Russian in blood and bone first took upon himself the rôle of pacifier in that unexampled war; he came forth everywhere, in the Senate and in the Diet, as the most ardent partisan of negotiations; he supported the policy of the chancellor and the primate; he condemned most powerfully Yeremi, and he did this in good faith, for the sake of the Cossacks and the Commonwealth; and he believed, with all his ardent spirit, that negotiations and compromises would smooth everything, would pacify, would unite; and just then, in that moment when he was bringing the baton to Hmelnitski and concessions to the Cossacks, he doubted all. He saw with his own eyes the vanity of his efforts; he saw beneath his feet a vacuum and a precipice.

"Do they want nothing but blood, do they care for no other freedom than the freedom of plunder and burning?" thought the voevoda in despair, and he stifled the groans which were tearing asunder his noble breast.

"The head of Kisel, the head of Kisel! Death to him!" was the answer of the crowds.

And the voevoda would have offered them as a willing gift that white and battered head, were it not for the remnant of his belief that it was necessary to give them and all the Cossacks something more, — rescue was immediately necessary for them and the Commonwealth. Let the future teach them to ask for the something more. And when he thought thus, a certain ray of hope and consolation lighted up for a moment that darkness which despair created in his mind, and the unfortunate old man said to himself that that mob was not the whole body of Cossacks, — not Hmelnitski and his colonels, — with whom negotiations would begin.

But can these negotiations be lasting while half a million of peasants stand under arms? Will they not melt at the first breath of spring, like the snows which at that moment covered the steppes? Here again came to the voevoda the words of Yeremi: "Kindness may be shown to the conquered alone." Here again his thoughts fell into darkness, and the precipice yawned beneath his feet.

Meantime midnight was passing. The shouting and shots had decreased in some degree; the whistle of the wind rose in their place, the yard was filled with a snowdrift; the wearied crowds had evidently begun to disperse to their houses; hope entered the hearts of the commissioners.

Voitsekh Miaskovski, a chamberlain from Lvoff, rose from the bench, listened at the window to the drifting of the snow, and said, —

"It seems to me that with God's favor we shall live till morning."

"Perhaps too Hmelnitski will send more assistance, for we shall not reach our journey's end with what we have now," said Pan Smyarovski.

Pan Zelenski, the cup-bearer from Bratslav, smiled bitterly: "Who would say that we are peace commissioners?"

"I have been an envoy more than once to the Tartars," said the ensign of Novgrodek, "but such a mission as this I have not seen in my life. The Commonwealth endures more contempt in our persons than at Korsún and Pilavtsi. I say, gentlemen, let us return, for there is no use in thinking of negotiations."

"Let us return," repeated as an echo Pan Bjozovski, the castellan of Kieff; "there can be no peace; let there be war!"

Kisel raised his lids and fixed his glassy eyes on the castellan. "Jóltiya Vodi, Korsún, Pilavtsi!" said he, in hollow tones.

He was silent, and after him all were silent. But Pan Kulchinski, the treasurer of Kieff, began to repeat the rosary in an audible voice; and Pan Kjetovski, master of the chase, seized his head with both hands, and repeated, —

"What times, what times! God have mercy upon us!"

The door opened, and Bryshovski, captain of the dragoons of the bishop of Poznania, commander of the convoy, entered the room.

"Serene voevoda," said he, "some Cossack wants to see the commissioners."

"Very well," answered Kisel; "has the crowd dispersed?"

"The people have gone away; they promised to return to-morrow."

"Did they press on much?"

"Terribly, but Donyéts' Cossacks killed a number of them. To-morrow they promise to burn us."

"Very well, let that Cossack enter."

After a while the door was opened, and a certain tall, black-bearded figure appeared at the threshold of the room.

"Who are you?" asked Kisel.

"Yan Skshetuski, colonel of hussars of Prince Vishnyevetski, voevoda of Rus."

The castellan Bjozovski, Pan Kulchinski, and the master of the chase Pan Kjetovski sprang from their seats. All of them had served the past year under the prince at Makhnovka and Konstantinoff, and knew Skshetuski perfectly. Kjetovski was even related to him.

"Is it true, is it true? Is this Pan Skshetuski?" repeated they.

"What are you doing here, and how did you reach us?" asked Kjetovski, taking him by the shoulder.

"In peasant's disguise, as you see," said Skshetuski.

"This," cried Bjozovski to Kisel, "is the foremost knight in the army of the voevoda of Rus; he is famous throughout the whole army."

"I greet him with thankful heart," said Kisel, "and I see that he must be a man of great resolution, since he has forced his way to us." Then to Skshetuski he said: "What do you wish of us?"

"That you permit me to go with you."

"You are crawling into the jaws of the dragon, but if such is your wish we cannot oppose it."

Skshetuski bowed in silence.

Kisel looked at him with astonishment. The severe face of the young knight, with its expression of dignity and suffering, struck him. "Tell me," said he, "what causes drive you to this hell, to which no one comes of his own accord?"

"Misfortune, serene voevoda."

"I have made a needless inquiry," said Kisel. "You must have lost some of your relatives for whom you are looking?"

"I have."

"Was it long since?"

"Last spring."

"How is that, and you start only now on the search? Why, it is nearly a year! What were you doing in the mean while?"

"I was fighting under the voevoda of Rus."

"Would not such a true man as he give you leave of absence?"

"I did not wish it myself."

Kisel looked again at the young knight, and then followed a silence, interrupted by the castellan of Kieff.

"The misfortunes of this knight are known to all of us who served with the prince. We shed more than one tear

over them, and it is the more praiseworthy on his part that he preferred to serve his country while the war lasted instead of seeking his own good. This is a rare example in these times of corruption."

"If it shall appear that my word has any weight with Hmelnitski, then believe me I shall not spare it in your cause," said Kisel.

Skshetuski bowed a second time.

"Go now and sleep," said the voevoda, kindly; "for you must be wearied in no small degree, like all of us who have not had a moment's rest."

"I will take him to my quarters, for he is my relative," said Kjetovski.

"Let us all go to rest; who knows whether we shall sleep to-morrow night?" said Bjozovski.

"Maybe an eternal sleep," concluded the voevoda. Then he went to the small room, at the door of which his attendant was waiting, and afterward the others separated.

Kjetovski took Skshetuski to his quarters, which were some houses distant. His attendant preceded them with a lantern.

"What a dark night, and it howls louder every moment," said Kjetovski. "Oh, Pan Yan, what a day we have passed! I thought the last judgment had come. The mob almost put the knife to our throats. Bjozovski's arms grew weak, and we had already begun prayers for the dying."

"I was in the crowd," said Skshetuski. "To-morrow evening they expect a new band of robbers to whom they sent word about you. We must leave here absolutely. But are you going to Kieff?"

"That depends on the answer of Hmelnitski, to whom Prince Chetvertinski has gone. Here are my quarters; come in, I pray you, Pan Yan! I have ordered some wine to be heated, and we will strengthen ourselves before sleep."

They entered the room, in which a big fire was burning in the chimney. Steaming wine was on the table already. Skshetuski seized a glass eagerly.

"I've had nothing between my lips since yesterday," said he.

"You are terribly emaciated. It is clear that sorrow and toil have been gnawing you. But tell me about yourself, for I know of your affair. You think then of seeking the princess there among them?"

"Either her or death," answered the knight.

"You will more easily find death. How do you know that she may be there?"

"Because I have looked for her elsewhere."

"Where?"

"Along the Dniester as far as Yagorlik. I went with Armenian merchants, for there were indications that she was secreted there; I went everywhere, and now I am going to Kieff, since Bogun was to take her there."

Scarcely had the colonel mentioned the name of Bogun when the master of the chase seized himself by the head. "As God lives!" he cried, "I have not told you the most important of all. I heard that Bogun is killed."

Skshetuski grew pale. "How is that? Who told you?"

"That noble who saved the princess once, and who showed such bravery at Konstantinoff, told me. I met him when I was going to Zamost. We were passing on the road. I merely inquired for the news, and he answered me that Bogun was killed. I asked: 'Who killed him?' 'I,' said he. Then we parted."

The flame which had flashed in the face of Skshetuski was suddenly quenched. "That noble!" said he; "it is impossible to believe him. No, no, he could n't be in a condition to kill Bogun."

"And did n't you see him, Pan Yan, for I remember too that he told me he was going to you at Zamost?"

"I did not wait for him at Zamost. He must be now at Zbaraj. I was in a hurry to overtake the commission. I did not return from Kamenyets to Zbaraj, and I did not see him. God alone knows whether even that is true which he told me about her, which he as it were overheard while captive with Bogun, — that Bogun had hidden her beyond Yampol, and then intended to take her to Kieff for marriage. Perhaps this too is untrue, like everything Zagloba said."

"Why do you go then to Kieff?"

Skshetuski was silent; for a moment nothing was heard but the whistling and howling of the wind.

"For," said Kjetovski, placing his finger on his forehead, "if Bogun is not killed, you may fall into his hands with ease."

"I go to find him," answered Skshetuski, in a hollow voice.

"Why?"

"Let God's judgment be passed between us."

"But he will not fight with you; he will simply bind you, take your life, or sell you to the Tartars."

"I am with the commissioners, in their suite."

"God grant that we bring our own lives out of this! What is the use of talking of the suite?"

"To whom life is heavy, the earth will be light."

"But have the fear of God before you, Yan! It is not a question here of death, for that avoids no man, but they can sell you to the Turkish galleys."

"Do you think that would be worse for me than the present?"

"I see that you are desperate, and trust not in the mercy of God."

"You are mistaken! I say that it is evil for me in the world, because it is; but long ago I was reconciled to the will of God. I do not beg, I do not groan, I do not curse, I do not beat my head against the wall; I merely desire to accomplish that which pertains to me while strength and life remain."

"But grief is devouring you like poison."

"God gave grief to devour, and he will send the cure when he wishes."

"I have no answer to such an argument," said Kjetovski. "In God is the only salvation; in him hope for us and the whole Commonwealth. The king went to Chenstokhova. He may obtain something from the Most Holy Lady; otherwise we shall all perish."

Silence followed, and from outside the window came only the constant "Who 's there?" of the dragoons.

"True, true," said Kjetovski. "We all belong more to the dead than the living. People have forgotten to smile in this Commonwealth; they only groan like that wind in the chimney. I too have believed that happier times would come, till I went on this journey with others; but now I see that that was a barren hope. Ruin, war, hunger, murder, and nothing more, — nothing more."

Skshetuski was silent; the blaze of the fire lighted his stern, emaciated face. Finally he raised his head and said with a voice of dignity, —

"That is all temporal, which passes away, vanishes, and leaves nothing behind."

"You speak like a monk," said Kjetovski.

Skshetuski made no answer; the wind only groaned each moment more sadly in the chimney.