CHAPTER L.

Next morning early the commissioners left Novoselki, and with them Skshetuski; but that was a tearful journey, in which at every stopping-place, in every village, they were threatened with death, and met with contempt, which was worse than death, — worse specially in this, that the commissioners bore in their own persons the dignity and majesty of the Commonwealth. Pan Kisel grew ill, so that at every lodging-place he was borne from the sleigh to the house. The chamberlain of Lvoff wept over his own disgrace and that of the country. Captain Bryshovski fell ill also from sleeplessness and toil. Pan Yan therefore took his place, and led on farther that hapless suite amidst the pressure of crowds, insults, threats, skirmishes, and battles.

At Bélgorod it seemed to the commissioners again that their last hour had come. The crowd had beaten the sick Bryshovski, were killing Pan Gnyazdovski; and only the arrival of the metropolitan for an interview with the voevoda put a stop to the intended slaughter. They did not wish to admit the commissioners into Kieff at all. Prince Chetvertinski returned, February 11, from Hmelnitski without an answer. The commissioners did not know what further to do or where to go. Their return was prevented by immense parties waiting only for the breaking of negotiations to kill the envoys. The mob became more and more insolent; the bridles of the dragoons' horses were seized, and the road stopped; stones, pieces of ice, and frozen lumps of snow were thrown into the sleigh of the voevoda. At Gvozdova, Skshetuski and Donyéts had to fight a bloody battle in which they dispersed several hundred of the mob. The ensign of Novgrodek and Pan Smyarovski went with a new argument to persuade Hmelnitski to come to meet the commissioners at Kieff, but the voevoda had little hope that they would live to reach him. Meanwhile the commissioners in Khvastovo were forced to look with folded arms on the crowds killing prisoners of both sexes and of every age. Some were drowned through holes in the ice,

some were drenched with water poured over them in the frost, others stabbed with forks or whittled to death with knives. Eighteen of such days passed before at last the answer came from Hmelnitski that he would not go to Kieff, but was waiting in Pereyasláv for the voevoda and the commissioners.

When they had crossed the Dnieper at Trypole and reached Voronkovo in the night, from which place it was only thirty miles to Pereyasláv, the unfortunate commissioners drew a breath of relief, thinking that their torment was over. Hmelnitski went out two miles and a half to meet them, wishing to show honor to the royal embassy, but how changed from those days in which he put himself forward as an injured man, — "quantum mutatus ab illo!" as Kisel justly wrote of him. He rode forth with a suite of horsemen, with his colonels and essauls, with martial music, under the standard, bunchuk, and crimson banner, like a sovereign prince.

The commissioners with their retinue halted at once; and Hmelnitski, riding up to the front sleigh, in which sat the voevoda, looked for a while at his venerable face, then raised his cap slightly and said, —

"With the forehead to you, Commissioners of the king, and to you, Voevoda. It had been better to commence treating with me long ago, when I was less and did not know my own power; but because the king has sent you to me, I receive you with thankful heart in my own land."

"Greetings to you, Hetman!" answered Kisel. "His Majesty the King has sent us to present his favor and mete out justice."

"I am thankful for the favor; but justice I have already meted out with this [and here he struck upon his sabre] on your necks, and I will mete out more of it if you do not give me satisfaction."

"You do not greet us very affably, Pan Hetman of the Zaporojians, — us, the envoys of the king."

"I will not speak in the cold; there will be a better time for that," replied Hmelnitski, dryly. "Let me into your sleigh, Kisel, for I wish to show you honor and ride with you."

Then he dismounted and approached the sleigh. Kisel pushed himself to the right, leaving the left side vacant. Seeing this, Hmelnitski frowned and exclaimed: "Give me the right side!"

"I am a senator of the Commonwealth," replied Kisel.

"And what is a senator to me? Pan Pototski is the first senator and hetman of the Crown; I have him in fetters with others, and can empale him to-morrow, if I wish."

A blush appeared on the pale face of Kisel. "I represent the person of the king here!" said he.

Hmelnitski frowned still more, but restrained himself and sat on the left side, muttering: "Granted; he is king in Warsaw, but I am in Russia. I see that I have not trodden enough on your necks."

Kisel gave no answer, but raised his eyes to heaven. He had already a foretaste of that which waited him, and he thought justly at that time that if the road to Hmelnitski was a Calvary, to be envoy to him was a passion indeed.

The horses moved to the town, in which twenty cannon were thundering and all the bells tolling. Hmelnitski, as if fearing that the commissioners should consider these sounds as given out exclusively in their honor, said to the voevoda, —

"I receive in this manner not only you but other ambassadors who are sent to me."

And Hmelnitski spoke the truth, for in fact embassies were sent to him as to a reigning prince. Returning from Zamost under the influence of the election and the defeats inflicted by the Lithuanian forces, the hetman had not one half of this pride in his heart; but when Kieff went forth to meet him with torches and banners, when the academy greeted him "tamquam Moijsem, servatorem, salvatorem, liberatorem, populi de servitute lechica et bono omine Bogdan, — God-given;" when finally he was called "illustrissimus princeps," — then, according to the words of a contemporary, "the beast was elated." He had a real sense of his power, and felt the ground under his feet, which had been wanting to him hitherto.

Foreign embassies were a silent recognition as well of his power as of his separateness; the uninterrupted friendship of the Tartars, purchased by the greater part of the booty gained, and by the ill-fated captives whom that leader of the people permitted to be taken from the people, promised support against every enemy; therefore Hmelnitski, who recognized at Zamost the suzerainty and will of the king, was at that time so settled in pride, convinced of his own power, of the disorder of the Commonwealth, the incompetence of its leaders, that he was ready to raise his hand against the king himself, dreaming in his gloomy soul, not of Cossack freedom nor the restoration of the former privileges of the Zaporojians, not of justice for himself, but of a separate lordship, of a princely crown and sceptre.

And he felt himself master of the Ukraine. The Zaporojians clung to him, for never under any man's command had they so wallowed in blood and booty. A people wild by nature rallied to him; for while the peasant of Mazovia or of Great Poland bore without a murmur that burden of power and oppression which in all Europe weighed upon the "descendants of Ham," the man of the Ukraine drew into himself with the air of the steppes a love of freedom as unbounded, wild, and vigorous as the steppes themselves. Could he wish to walk after the plough of a master when his gaze was lost in the fields of God, and not of a master; when beyond the Cataracts the Saitch called to him, "Leave your lord, and come to freedom!" when the stern Tartar taught him war, accustomed his eyes to conflagration and slaughter and his hands to weapons? Was it not pleasanter for him to frolic with Hmelnitski and "slay the lords" than to bend his proud back before a land steward?

Besides this, the people rallied to Hmelnitski, for whoever did not went into captivity. In Stamboul a prisoner was exchanged for ten arrows, and three for a bow seasoned by the fire, — such was the number of them! The multitude indeed had no choice; and one song, wonderful for that time, has remained, which long afterward succeeding generations sang of that leader called a Moses, — "Oh, that the first bullet might not miss that Hmelnitski!"

Villages, towns, and hamlets disappeared; the country was turned into a desert and a ruin, — a wound which ages were not able to heal. But that leader and hetman did not see this, or did not wish to see it; for he never saw anything by reason of himself, and he grew and fattened on blood and fire. In his own monstrous self-love he was destroying his own people and his own country; and now he brings in those commissioners to Pereyasláv with the thunder of cannon and the tolling of bells, as a separate ruler, as a hospodar, as a prince!

The commissioners went into the den of the lion hanging their heads, and the remnant of hope was quenched in them. Meanwhile Skshetuski, riding behind the second rank of sleighs, examined carefully the faces of the colonels who had come with Hmelnitski, to find among them Bogun.

After fruitless search on the Dniester to a point beyond Yagorlik, the plan had long since matured in the soul of Pan Yan, as the last and only method, to find Bogun and challenge him to a death-struggle. The unfortunate knight knew, it is true, that in such a venture Bogun might destroy him without a struggle or give him up to the Tartars; but he thought better of Bogun. He was aware of his courage and mad daring, and was almost sure that, having the choice, he would fight for the princess. Therefore he formed the plan to bind Bogun by an oath that in case of his death he would let Helena go. Of himself Skshetuski did not care; and supposing that Bogun would say, "If I die, she is neither for me nor for you," he was ready to agree to this and bind himself by oath, if he could only save her from the hands of the enemy. Let her seek peace in the cloister for the rest of her life. He would seek that peace first in war, and then if death did not come to him, would seek it under the habit, as did all suffering souls in that age. The way seemed to Skshetuski straight and clear; and since at Zamost the idea of a struggle with Bogun had been given, now that his search along the reeds of the Dniester was fruitless, that way seemed the only one. With this purpose he hurried from the Dniester in one journey, resting nowhere, hoping to find Bogun without fail either near Hmelnitski or in Kieff, especially since, according to what Zagloba had said in Yarmolintsi, the chief was to be married in Kieff with three hundred tapers.

But Skshetuski sought him in vain among the colonels. He found instead many old acquaintances of peace times, — such as Daidyalo, whom he had seen in Chigirin; Yashevski, who had been an envoy from the Saitch to the Prince; Yarosha, a former sotnik of the prince; Naókolopályets, Grusha, and many others. He determined then to ask them.

"We are old acquaintances," said Skshetuski, approaching Yashevski.

"I knew you in Lubni; you are one of Prince Yeremi's knights. We drank and frolicked together in Lubni. And what is your prince doing?"

"He is well."

"In spring he will not be well. He has n't met Hmelnitski yet; but he will meet him, and will have to go to destruction alone."

"As God judges."

"God is good to our father Hmelnitski. Your prince will never return to his Tartar bank on the east of the Dnieper. Hmelnitski has many a Cossack, and what has your prince? He is a good soldier. And are you not in his service now?"

"I attend the commissioners."

"Well, I am glad; you are an old acquaintance."

"If you are glad, then do me a service, and I shall be thankful."

"What service?"

"Tell me where is Bogun, that famous ataman, formerly of the Pereyasláv regiment, who must have a high office among you now."

"Silence!" answered Yashevski, threateningly. "It is your luck that we are old acquaintances and that I drank with you, otherwise I should stretch you on the snow with this whirlbat."

Skshetuski was astonished; but being a man of ready courage, he squeezed his baton and asked: "Are you mad?"

"I am not mad, nor do I wish to threaten you; but there is an order from Hmelnitski that if any of you, even one of the commissioners, should ask a question, to kill him on the spot. If I do not do this, another will; therefore I warn you out of good feeling."

"But I ask in my own private affair."

"Well, it is all one. Hmelnitski told us, the colonels, and commanded us to tell others: 'If any one asks, even about wood for the stove, or ashes, kill him.' You tell this to your people."

"I thank you for good advice," said Skshetuski.

"You are the only one; I have warned you alone. I should be the first to stretch another Pole on the ground."

They were silent. The party had already reached the gates of the town. Both sides of the road and the street were swarming with the crowd and armed Cossacks, who out of regard for the presence of Hmelnitski did not dare to scatter curses and lumps of snow at the sleighs, but who looked frowningly at the commissioners, clinching their fists or grasping the hilts of their sabres.

Skshetuski, having formed his dragoons four deep, raised his head and rode haughtily and calmly through the broad street, not paying the least attention to the threatening looks of the multitude; in his soul he only thought how much cool blood, self-reliance, and Christian patience would be necessary for him to carry through what he had planned, and not sink at the first step in that sea of hatred.