

CHAPTER LX.

MANY a simple knight covered himself with undying glory on that memorable rampart of Zbaraj; but the lyre will celebrate Pan Longin Podbipienta among the first, since the greatness of his gifts could be equalled only by his modesty. The night was gloomy, dark, and wet; the soldiers, wearied with watching at the ramparts, dozed, leaning on their weapons. After the recent ten days of firing and assaults, this was the first moment of quiet and rest. From the neighboring trenches of the Cossacks — for they were scarcely thirty yards distant — there were neither cries, curses, nor the usual uproar. It appeared as though the enemy, wishing to weary the Poles, had grown weary themselves. Here and there only glittered the faint light of a fire, covered under a mound; from one place came the sweet, low sound of a lute, on which some Cossack was playing; far away in the Tartar camp the horses neighed; and on the embankments, from time to time, was heard the voice of the guards.

The armored cavalry of the prince was on infantry duty that night. Skshetuski, Podbipienta, Volodyovski, and Zagloba on the bulwark were whispering quietly among themselves; in the intervals of the conversation they listened to the sound of the rain falling into the ditch.

"This quiet is strange to me," said Skshetuski. "My ears are so accustomed to thundering and uproar that silence rings in them; but I hope treachery is not hidden in this silence."

"Since I am on half-rations it is all one to me," muttered Zagloba, gloomily. "My courage demands three things, — to eat well, to drink well, and to sleep well. The best strap, if not oiled, will grow dry and break; what if, in addition, you soak it in water, like hemp? The rain soaks us, the Cossacks hackle us, and why should not strips fall from us? Beautiful conditions! — a biscuit costs a florin, and a measure of vudka five. A dog would not take this foul water in his mouth, for in the wells is the essence of the dead; and I am as thirsty as my boots, which have their mouths open like fish."

"But your boots drink water without extravagant talk."

"You might keep your mouth shut, Pan Michael! You are no bigger than a titmouse; you can live on a grain of millet and drink out of a thimble. But I thank God that I am not so delicate, and that a hen did not scratch me out of the sand with her hind legs, but a woman gave me birth; therefore I must live by eating and drinking, like a man, not like a May-bug; and as I have had nothing in my mouth but spittle since yesterday noon, your jokes are not at all to my taste."

Here Zagloba began to puff with anger, and Pan Michael put his hand on his side and said, —

"I have in my pocket a flask, which I got of a Cossack to-day; but if a hen scratched me out of the sand, I think gorailka from such an insignificant person would not be to your taste. Here's to you, Yan!" said he, turning to Skshetuski.

"Give it here," said Skshetuski, "for the air is cold."

"Drink to Pan Longin."

"You are a rogue, Pan Michael," said Zagloba, "but you are one in a hundred; you take from yourself and give to others. A blessing on hens that scratch such soldiers from the sand! But there are none such, and I was not thinking of you."

"Then take it after Podbipienta. I have no wish to offend you."

"What are you doing? Leave some to me!" cried Zagloba in alarm, when he saw the Lithuanian drinking. "Why do you throw your head back so far? God grant it to remain in its usual place. You are too long; it is no small task to moisten you. May you burst!"

"I've barely touched it," said Podbipienta, handing him the flask.

Zagloba turned over the flask completely, and drank to the bottom; then he snorted, and said, —

"The only consolation is that if our miseries come to an end, and God lets us take our heads out of these dangers in safety, we'll reward ourselves for all. They will be sure to prepare some loaves for us. The priest Jabkovski has fine skill in eating, but I'll make a ram's-horn of him."

"And what word of truth have you and Jabkovski heard to-day from Mukhovetski?"

"Silence!" said Skshetuski; "there is some one coming from the square."

They were silent; and soon a dark figure stood near them, and asked in a hushed voice: "Are you watching?"

"We are," answered Skshetuski, straightening himself.

"Give careful attention; this calm is of evil augury."

The prince passed on to see if sleep had overcome the wearied soldiers anywhere. Pan Longin clasped his hands: "What a leader! what a warrior!"

"He takes less rest than we do," said Skshetuski. "He examines the whole rampart in this way every night as far as the second pond."

"God grant him health!"

"Amen!"

Silence followed. All looked with strained eyes into the darkness, but nothing could be seen. The Cossack trenches were quiet, the last light in them quenched.

"They might be caught napping now, like susliks," muttered Volodyovski.

"Who knows?" answered Skshetuski.

"Sleep torments me," said Zagloba, "so that my eyes are coming out, and sleep is not permitted. I am curious to know when it will be permitted. Whether there is firing or not, one must stand under arms and nod from weariness, like a Jew on the Sabbath. It's a dog's service! I don't know myself what has got hold of me, — whether it's the gorailka, or the irritation from that blow which I with the priest Jabkovski was forced to endure without reason."

"How was that?" asked Podbipienta; "you began to tell us, and didn't finish."

"I'll tell you now. Maybe we'll shake off sleep somehow. I went this morning with Jabkovski to the castle, hoping to come upon something to gnaw. We search and search, look everywhere, find nothing; we return in bad humor. In the yard we meet a Calvinist minister who had been giving the last consolation to Captain Shenberk, of Firlei's battalion, who was shot yesterday. I opened on him: 'Have n't you,' said I, 'strolled around about long enough, and displeased the Lord sufficiently? You will draw a curse on us.' But he, relying evidently on the protection of the castellan of Belsk, answered: 'Our faith is as good as yours, if not better!' And he spoke in such a way that we were petrified from horror. But we kept silent. I thought to myself: 'Jabkovski is here; let him do the arguing.' But my Jabkovski snorted, and whacked him under the ribs with arguments. He made no answer

to this strongest of reasons, for he went spinning around till he was brought up standing against the wall. That moment the prince came in with Mukhovetski and fell upon us; said that we were making an uproar and disturbance; that it was neither the time nor the place, nor were ours the arguments. They washed our heads for us, as if we had been a couple of boys. I wish they were right; for unless I am a false prophet, these ministers of Firlei will bring misfortune to us yet."

"And did not that Captain Shenberk renounce his errors?" asked Volodyovski.

"What, renounce! He died, as he had lived, in abomination!"

"Oh that men should yield up their salvation rather than their stubbornness!" sighed Pan Longin.

"God is defending us against Cossack predominance and witchcraft," continued Zagloba; "but these heretics are offending him. It is known to you, gentlemen, that yesterday, from this very intrenchment before us, they shot balls of thread into the square; and the soldiers say that immediately on the place where the balls fell the ground was covered with a leprosy."

"It's a known fact that devils wait on Hmelnitski," said the Lithuanian, making the sign of the cross.

"I saw the witches myself," added Skshetuski, "and I'll tell you —"

Further conversation was stopped by Volodyovski, who pressed Skshetuski's arm suddenly, and whispered: "Silence!" Then he sprang to the very edge of the rampart, and listened attentively.

"I hear nothing," said Zagloba.

"Ts! the rain drowns it," answered Skshetuski.

Pan Michael began to beckon with his hand not to interrupt him, and he listened carefully for some time. At last he approached his comrades. "They are marching!" whispered he.

"Let the prince know; he has gone to Ostrorog's quarters," whispered Pan Yan. "We will run to warn the soldiers."

Straightway they hurried along the ramparts, stopping from moment to moment and whispering everywhere to the soldiers on guard: "They are coming! they are coming!"

The words flew like silent lightning from mouth to mouth. In a quarter of an hour the prince, already on

horseback, was present, and issuing orders to the officers. Since the enemy wished, evidently, to spring into the camp while the Poles were asleep and off guard, the prince enjoined on all to maintain this error. The soldiers were to remain in immovable stillness and let the assaulters come to the very rampart, and when cannon-shot was given as a signal, to strike unexpectedly.

The soldiers were ready. They dropped the muzzles of their guns, bent forward noiselessly, and deep silence followed. Skshetuski, Pan Longin, and Volodyovski drew long breaths, side by side. Zagloba stayed near them, for he knew by experience that most balls fell on the square, and that it was safest on the ramparts near three such sabres. They merely drew back a little, that the first onrush might not strike them. Podbipienta knelt somewhat to one side with his double-handed sword; Volodyovski crouched near Skshetuski, and whispered in his very ear,—

"They are coming, surely."

"With measured tread."

"That's not the mob, nor the Tartars."

"Zaporozian infantry."

"Or janissaries; they march well. We could strike them better with cavalry."

"It is too dark for cavalry to-night."

"Do you hear them now?"

"Ts! Ts!"

The camp seemed sunk in deepest sleep. In no place movement, in no place life; everywhere the most profound silence, broken only by the rustle of rain fine as if scattered from a sieve. Gradually, however, there rose in this another rustle, low, but more easily caught by the ear, for it was measured, drawing nearer, growing clearer; at last, a few steps from the ditch, appeared a sort of prolonged dense mass, visible in so far that it was blacker than the darkness, and halted.

The soldiers held their breaths; but the little knight punched Skshetuski in the side, as if wishing in this way to show his delight. The assailants reached the ditch, let down their ladders into it, descended on them, and moved toward the rampart. The rampart was as silent as if on it and behind it everything had expired; a silence of the grave succeeded. Here and there, in spite of all the care of the assailants, the ladder-rounds squeaked and trembled.

"You'll get beans!" thought Zagloba.

Volodyovski stopped punching Skshetuski, Pan Longin pressed the hilt of his double-handed sword, and distended his eyes, for he was nearest the edge of the rampart and expected to give the first blow.

Three pairs of hands appeared on the outer rim, and grasped it firmly; after them began to rise slowly and carefully three helmet points, higher and higher.

"Those are Turks!" thought Pan Longin.

At that moment was heard the awful roar of several thousand muskets; it was clear as day. Before the light had gone out Pan Longin had drawn his weapon and cut terribly, so that the air whined under his sword-edge. Three bodies fell into the ditch, three heads in helmets rolled to the knees of the kneeling knight. Then, though hell was raging on earth, heaven opened before Pan Longin; wings grew from his shoulders; choirs of angels were singing in his breast, and he was as if caught up to heaven; he fought as in a dream, and the blows of his sword were like thanks-giving prayers. All the Podbipientas, long since dead, beginning with Stoveiko, the founder of the line, were rejoicing in heaven that the last surviving, Zervikaptur Podbipienta, was such a man.

This assault, in which auxiliary forces of Rumelian and Silistrian Turks, with guards from the janissaries of the Khan, took a preponderant part, received a more terrible repulse than others, and drew a fearful storm on Hmelnitski's head. He had guaranteed in advance that the Poles would fight with less rage against the Turks, and if those companies were given him he would capture the camp. He was obliged therefore to mollify the Khan and the enraged murzas, and at the same time win them with presents. He gave the Khan ten thousand thalers; Tugai Bey, Korz Aga, Subahazi, Nuredin, and Galga, two thousand each.

Meanwhile the camp-servants drew the bodies out of the ditch. In this they were not hindered by firing from the intrenchment. The soldiers rested till morning, for it was certain that the assault would not be repeated. All slept uninterruptedly, except the troops on guard and Podbipienta, who lay, in the form of a cross, all night on his sword, thanking God, who had permitted him to accomplish his vow and cover himself with such renown that his name had gone from mouth to mouth in the camp and the town. Next morning the prince summoned him, and praised him greatly, and the soldiers came in crowds all day to

congratulate him and look at the three heads which the attendants had brought before his tent, and which were already blackening in the air. There was wonder and envy not a little, and some would not believe their eyes, for the heads and the capes of the helmets were cut off as evenly as if some one had cut them with shears.

"You are an awful tailor!" said the nobles. "We knew that you were a good knight; but the ancients might envy such a blow, for the best executioner could not give a better."

"The wind does not take off caps as those heads were taken!" said another.

All pressed the palms of Pan Longin; but he stood with downcast eyes, sunshiny, sweet, timid as a maiden before marriage, and said as if in explanation: "They were in good position."

Then they tested the sword; but since it was the double-handed sword of a crusader, no man could move it freely, not excepting even the priest Jabkovski, though he could break a horse-shoe like a reed.

Around the tent it grew noisier; and Zagloba, Skshetuski, and Volodyovski did the honors to the visitors, treating them with stories, for they had nothing else to give them since the last biscuits in the camp had been eaten; they had long had no other meat than dried horse-flesh. But valor gave them meat and drink. Toward the end, when the others began to disperse, Marek Sobieski appeared with his lieutenant, Stempovski. Pan Longin ran out to meet him; the starosta greeted him with thanks, and said, —

"It is a holiday with you?"

"In truth it is a holiday," answered Zagloba, "for our friend has fulfilled a vow."

"Praise be to the Lord God!" answered the starosta. "Then it is not long, brother, till we may congratulate you on your marriage! And have you any one in mind?"

Pan Longin was extremely confused, grew red to his ears; and the starosta continued, —

"I see by your confusion that you have. It is your sacred duty to remember that such a stock should not perish."

Then he pressed the hands of Pan Longin, Skshetuski, Zagloba, and the little knight; and they were rejoiced in their hearts to hear praise from such lips, for the starosta of Krasnostav was the mirror of bravery, honor, and every

knightly virtue, — he was an incarnate Mars. All the gifts of God were richly united in him, for in remarkable beauty he surpassed even his younger brother Yan, who was afterward king. He was equal in fortune and name to the very first, and the great Yermi himself exalted his military gifts to the skies. He would have been a wonderful star in the heaven of the Commonwealth, but that by the disposition of God, the younger, Yan, took his glory to himself, and Marek vanished before his time in a day of disaster.

Hitherto our knights had rejoiced greatly at the praises of this hero; but he did not stop at that, and continued, —

"I have heard much of you from the prince himself, who loves you beyond others. I do not wonder that you serve him without reference to promotion, which comes more readily in the regiments of the king."

"We are all," answered Skshetuski, "really enrolled in the hussar regiment of the king, except Pan Zagloba, who is a volunteer from native valor. We serve under the prince, first, out of love for his person, and, secondly, because we wish to have as much as we can of the war."

"If such be your wish, you have chosen well. Surely Pan Podbipienta could not have found his heads under any other command so easily. But as to war in these times, we all have enough of it."

"More than of anything else," said Zagloba. "Men have been coming here from early morning with praises; but if any one would ask us to a bite of food and a drink of gorailka, he would honor us best."

Having said this, Zagloba looked diligently into Sobieski's eyes, and muttered unquietly; but the starosta laughed, and said, —

"Since yesterday noon I have taken nothing into my mouth. A gulp of gorailka, however, I think can be found somewhere. I am at your service, gentlemen, for that."

Skshetuski, Pan Longin, and Volodyovski began to draw back and scold Zagloba, who extricated himself as he could and explained matters as he was able.

"I did not press myself," said he, "for it is my ambition rather to give away my own than touch what belongs to another; but when such a distinguished person invites, it would be churlish to refuse."

"Well, come on!" said the starosta. "I like to sit in good company, and while there is no firing we have time. I do not ask you to eat, for it is difficult to get horse-flesh, —

for each horse killed on the square a hundred hands are stretched forth; but there are two flasks of gorailka which certainly I shall not keep for myself."

The others were unwilling, and refused; but when he insisted urgently, they went. Pan Stempovski hurried on in advance, and exerted himself so that a few biscuits and some bits of horse-flesh were found as a bite after the gorailka. Zagloba was in better spirits immediately, and said, —

"God grant the king to liberate us from this siege, then we will go at once to the wagons of the general militia. They always carry a world of good things with them, and care more for their stomachs than they do for the Commonwealth. I'd rather eat with them than fight in their company; but being under the eye of the king, perhaps they will fight fairly well."

The starosta grew serious. "Since we have sworn," said he, "to fall one after another without surrender, we shall do so. We must be ready for still harder times. We have scarcely any provisions, and what is worse, our powder is coming to an end. I should not say this to others, but to you I can speak. Soon we shall have nothing but desperate determination in our hearts and sabres in our hands, readiness for death, and nothing more. God grant the king to come at the earliest moment, for this is our last hope! He is a military man, and is sure not to spare life, health, or comfort in rescuing us; but his forces are too few, and he must wait,—you know how slowly the general militia musters. Besides, how is the king to know the conditions in which we are defending ourselves, and that we are eating the last fragments?"

"We have sacrificed ourselves," said Skshetuski.

"But could n't we let him know?" asked Zagloba.

"If there could be found a man of such virtue as to undertake to steal through," said the starosta, "he would win immortal glory in his lifetime,—he would be the savior of the whole army, and would avert defeat from the fatherland. Even if the general militia has not all appeared yet, perhaps the nearness of the king might disperse the rebellion. But who will go, who will undertake it, since Hmelnitski has so possessed every road and exit that a mouse could not squeeze through from the camp? Such an undertaking is clear and evident death!"

"But what are stratagems for?—and one is now entering my head."

"What is it, what is it?" asked the starosta.

"This. Every day we take prisoners: bribe one of these; let them feign escape from us, and run to the king."

"I must mention this to the prince," said the starosta.

Pan Longin fell into deep thought; his brows were covered with furrows, and he sat a whole hour in silence. Suddenly he raised his head, and spoke with his usual sweetness: "I will undertake to steal through the Cossacks."

The knights, hearing these words, sprang from their seats in amazement. Zagloba opened his mouth, Volodyovski's mustaches quivered, Skshetuski grew pale; and the starosta, striking himself on the breast, cried: "Would you undertake to do this?"

"Have you considered what you say?" asked Pan Yan.

"I considered it long ago," answered the Lithuanian; "for this is not the first day that the knights say that notice must be given the king of our position. And I, hearing this, thought to myself: 'If the Most High God permits me to fulfil my vow, I will go at once. I am an obscure man; what do I signify? What harm to me, even if I am killed on the road?'"

"But they will cut you to pieces, without doubt!" cried Zagloba. "Have you heard what the starosta says,—that it is evident death?"

"What of that, brother? If God wishes, he will carry me through; if not, he will reward me in heaven."

"But first they will seize you, torture you, give you a fearful death. Have you lost your reason, man?" asked Zagloba.

"I will go, anyhow," answered the Lithuanian, mildly.

"A bird could not fly through, for they would shoot it from their bows. They have surrounded us like a badger in his hole."

"Still I will go!" repeated the Lithuanian. "I owe thanks to the Lord for permitting me to fulfil my vow."

"Well, look at him, examine him!" said Zagloba, in desperation. "You would better have your head cut off at once and shoot it from a cannon over the tabor, for in this way alone could you push through them."

"But permit me, my friends," said Pan Longin, clasping his hands.

"Oh, no; you will not go alone, for I will go with you," said Skshetuski.

"And I with you both!" added Volodyovski, striking his sword.

"And may the bullets strike you!" cried Zagloba, seizing himself by the head. "May the bullets strike you with your 'And I,' 'And I,' with your daring! They have not had enough of blood yet, not enough of destruction, not enough of bullets! What is doing here is not sufficient for them; they want more certainty of having their necks twisted. Go to the dogs, and give me peace! I hope you will be cut to pieces." When he had said this he began to circle about in the tent as if mad. "God is punishing me," cried he, "for associating with whirlwinds instead of honorable, solid men. It serves me right." He walked through the tent awhile longer with feverish tread; at last he stopped before Skshetuski; then, putting his hands behind his back and looking into his eyes, began to puff terribly: "What have I done that you persecute me?"

"God save us!" exclaimed the knight. "What do you mean?"

"I do not wonder that Podbipienta invents such things; he always had his wit in his fist. But since he has killed the three greatest fools among the Turks he has become the fourth himself—"

"It is disgusting to hear him," interrupted the Lithuanian.

"And I don't wonder at *him*," continued Zagloba, pointing at Volodyovski. "He will jump on a Cossack's boot-leg, or hold to his trousers as a burr does to a dog's tail, and get through quicker than any of us. The Holy Spirit has not shone upon either of the two; but that you, instead of restraining their madness, should add excitement to it, that you are going yourself, and wish to expose us four to certain death and torture,—that is the final blow! Tfu! I did not expect this of an officer whom the prince himself has esteemed a valiant knight."

"How four?" asked Skshetuski, in astonishment. "Do you want to go?"

"Yes!" cried Zagloba, beating his breast with his fists, "I will go. If any of you go, or all go together, I will go too. My blood be on your heads! I shall know next time with whom to associate."

"Well may you!" said Skshetuski.

The three knights began to embrace him; but he was

angry in earnest, and puffed and pushed them away with his elbows, saying: "Go to the devil! I don't want your Judas kisses." Then was heard on the walls the firing of cannon and muskets. "There it is for you, go!"

"That is ordinary firing," remarked Pan Yan.

"Ordinary firing!" repeated Zagloba, mocking him. "Well, just think this is not enough for them. Half the army is destroyed by this ordinary firing, and they turn up their noses at it."

"Be of good cheer," said Podbipienta.

"You ought to keep your mouth shut, Botvinia. You are most to blame; you have invented an undertaking which if it is not a fool's errand then I'm a fool."

"But still I'll go, brother," said Pan Longin.

"You'll go, you'll go; and I know why. Don't exhibit yourself as a hero, for they know you. You have virtue for sale, and are in a hurry to take it out of camp. You are the worst among knights, not the best,—simply a drab, trading in virtue. Tfu! an offence to God,—that's what you are. It is not to the king you want to go, but you would like to snort through the villages like a horse through a meadow. Look at him! There is a knight with virtue for sale! Vexation, vexation, as God is dear to me!"

"Disgusting to hear him!" cried the Lithuanian, thrusting his fingers in his ears.

"Let disputes rest," said Skshetuski, seriously. "Better let us think about this question."

"In God's name," said the starosta, who had listened hitherto with astonishment to Zagloba, "this is a great question, but we can decide nothing without the prince. This is no place for discussion. You are in service and obliged to obey orders. The prince must be in his quarters; let us go to him and see what he will say to your offer."

"I agree to that," answered Zagloba; and hope shone in his face. "Let us go as quickly as possible."

They went out and crossed the square on which already the balls were falling from the Cossack trenches. The troops were at the ramparts, which at a distance looked like booths at a fair, so overhung were they with many-colored clothing and sheepskin coats, packed with wagons, fragments of tents, and every kind of object which might become a shelter against the shots which at times ceased neither day nor night. And now above those rags hung a long bluish line of smoke, and behind them ranks of prostrate red and