superhuman power strengthened the limbs of the knight. He pushed through reeds, clumps of earth, sank in the swamp, went under water, swam, and rose again. He did not dare yet to go on shore; but he almost felt that he was saved. He could not render account to himself of how long he advanced, wading in this way; but when he looked around again the watch-fires seemed like little points gleaming in the distance. A few hundred yards farther, and they vanished altogether. The moon went down; around about was silence. Now a noise was heard louder and more solemn than the rustle of the reeds. Skshetuski came near screaming with joy, — the woods were on both sides of the river.

He turned then to the bank and came out of the reeds. The pine-forest began here, beyond the rushes and reeds. The odor of rosin came to his nostrils; here and there in the depths shone the fern, like silver. He fell a second time on his knees, and kissed the earth in prayer. He was saved!

Then he entered the forest darkness, asking himself where he should go, where those forests would take him, where the king and the army were. His journey was not finished; it was not easy, it was not safe; but when he thought that he had come out of Zbaraj, — that he had stolen through the guards, swamps, tabors, and almost half a million of enemies, — then it seemed to him that all dangers were passed, that that forest was a clear highway which would lead him straight to his Majesty the King; and that wretched-looking, hungry, shivering man, bespattered with his own blood, with red filth, and black mud, passed on with joy in his heart, and hope that he would soon return in different circumstances and with greater power.

"They will not be left hungry and hopeless," thought he of his friends in Zbaraj, "for the king will come."

His heart rejoiced at the near rescue of the prince, the commanding officers, Volodyovski, Zagloba, and all those heroes confined in the ramparts. The forest depths opened before him and covered him with their shade.

CHAPTER LXII.

In the drawing-room of the Court at Toporoff sat three magnates one evening in secret consultation. A number of bright lights were burning on a table covered with maps of the surrounding country; near them lay a tall cap with a dark plume, a field-glass, and a sword with hilt set in pearls, on which was thrown a handkerchief embroidered with a crown, and a pair of elk-skin gloves. Near the table, in a high-armed chair, sat a man about forty years of age, rather small and slender, but powerfully built. He had a swarthy, sallow, wearied face, black eyes, and a Swedish wig of the same color, with long locks falling on his neck and shoulders; a thin black mustache, trimmed upward at the ends, adorned his upper lip. His lower lip with his beard protruded strongly, giving his whole physiognomy a characteristic mark of pride and stubbornness. It was not a beautiful face, but unusually lofty. A sensuous expression, indicating an inclination to pleasure, was combined in it with a certain sleepy torpor and coldness. The eyes were as if smouldering; but it was easy to guess that in a moment of exaltation, joy, or anger they could cast lightnings which not every eye might meet. At the same time kindness and affability were depicted on his countenance.

The black dress, composed of a satin doublet with lace ruffles, from under which a gold chain was visible, increased the distinction of this uncommon figure. On the whole, in spite of sadness and anxiety evident in the face and form, there was something majestic in them. In fact it was the king himself, Yan Kazimir Vaza, who had succeeded his brother Vladislav somewhat less than a year before.

A little behind him, in the half-shade, sat Hieronim Radzeyovski, the starosta of Lomjin, a thick, corpulent, low-set, red-visaged man with the unblushing face of a courtier; and opposite him, at the table, a third personage, leaning on his elbow, looking at the maps representing the country around, raising from time to time his eyes to the king. His face had less majesty, but almost more official distinction, than that of the king. The cool and reasoning face of the statesman was furrowed with cares and thought, the

severity of which had not marred his unusual beauty. He had penetrating blue eyes; his complexion was delicate, in spite of his age; a magnificent Polish dress, a beard trimmed in Swedish fashion, and the lofty tuft above his forehead, added still something of senatorial dignity to his features, regular as if chiselled from stone.

This was Yerzy Ossolinski, chancellor of the Crown, a prince of the Roman Empire, an orator, and a diplomat admired by the courts of Europe, — the famous opponent of Yeremi Vishnyevetski.

His unusual abilities turned upon him early in life the attention of preceding reigns, and soon raised him to the highest offices, in virtue of which he guided the ship of state, at the present moment near its final wreck.

But still the chancellor was as if created to be the helmsman of such a ship. Laborious, enduring, wise, looking to the distant future, calculating for long years, he would have directed any other State but the Commonwealth to a safe harbor with a sure and steady hand; for every other State he would have secured internal power and long years of strength, — if he had only been the absolute minister of such a monarch, for example, as the King of France or Spain.

Reared beyond the boundaries of his own country, furnished with foreign models, in spite of all his innate quickness of mind, in spite of long years of practice, he was unable to accustom himself to the helplessness of government in the Commonwealth; and all his life he could not learn to reckon with it, though that was the rock on which all his plans, designs, and efforts were wrecked, though by reason of this he saw now in the future a precipice and ruin, and later died with despair in his heart.

He was a genial theorist who did not know how to be genial in practice, and he fell into a circle of errors without issue. Possessing an idea which might give fruit in the future, he went to the realization of it with the stubbornness of a fanatic, not observing that that idea, saving in theory, might, in view of the actual condition of affairs, bring terrible disasters.

Wishing to strengthen the government and the State, he let loose the terrible Cossack element, not foreseeing that the storm would turn not only against the nobles, the great estates of the magnates, the abuses, license of the nobility, but against the most vital interests of the State itself.

YERZY OSSOLINSKI, CHANCELLOR OF POLAND.

From an engraving by Moncornet.

Hmelnitski rose out of the steppes and grew into a giant. On the Commonwealth fell the defeats of Jóltiya Vodi, Korsún, Pilavtsi. At the first step this Hmelnitski joined with the enemy, the Crimean power. Thunderbolt followed thunderbolt; there remained only war and war. The terrible element should have been crushed first of all, so as to use it in the future; but the chancellor, occupied with his idea, was still negotiating and delaying, and still believed even Hmelnitski.

The power of events crushed his theories; it became clearer every day that the results of the chancellor's efforts were directly opposed to his expectations, till at last came Zbaraj and confirmed it most convincingly.

The chancellor was staggering under the burden of regrets, bitterness, and universal hatred. He did that therefore which in times of failure and disaster people do whose faith in themselves is greater than all disasters, — he looked for the guilty.

The whole Commonwealth was to blame, and all the estates, — the past, and the aristocratic structure of the State; but he who fearing lest a rock lying on the incline of a mountain might fall to the bottom, wishes to roll it to the top without calculating the necessary force to do this, only hastens its fall. The chancellor did more and worse, for he called in the rushing and terrible Cossack torrent, not considering that its force could only wash out and carry off the foundation on which the rock was resting.

When he sought then for persons to blame, all eyes were turned upon himself as the cause of the war, the calamities and misfortune. But the king believed in him yet, and believed in him the more because the voice of all without sparing his Majesty accused him in an equal degree with the chancellor.

The king sat therefore in Toporoff suffering and sad, not knowing well what to do, for he had only twenty-five thousand troops. The conscript writs had been sent out too late, and barely a part of the general militia had assembled up to that time. Who was the cause of this delay, and was it not one more mistake of that stubborn policy of the chancellor? — the mystery was lost between the king and the minister; it is enough that both felt disarmed at that moment before the power of Hmelnitski.

What was more important yet, they had no accurate information concerning him. In the camp of the king it was

still unknown whether the Khan with all his forces was with Hmelnitski, or only Tugai Bey and a few thousands of the horde were accompanying the Cossacks. This was a matter as important as life or death. With Hmelnitski himself the king might in extremities try his fortune, though the rebellious hetman disposed of ten times greater power. The magic of the king's name meant much for the Cossacks, — more perhaps than the crowds of the general militia of unformed and untrained nobles; but if the Khan were present, it was an impossibility to meet such superior force.

Meanwhile there were the most varied reports on this head, and no one knew anything accurately. The careful Hmelnitski had concentrated his forces; he had not let out a single party of Cossacks or Tartars on purpose, that the king might not capture an informant. The rebellious hetman had another plan, — it was to shut in with a part of his forces Zbaraj, already dying, and appear himself unexpectedly with the whole Tartar and remaining Cossack force before the king, surround him and his army, and deliver him into the hands of the Khan.

It was not without reason then that a cloud covered the royal face, for there is no greater pain for a king than a feeling of weakness. Yan Kazimir leaned impotently on the back of the chair, threw his hands on the table and said, pointing to the maps, —

"These are useless. Get me informants."

"There is nothing I wish for more," answered Ossolinski.

"Have the scouts returned?"

"They have returned, but brought no one."

"Not a single prisoner?"

"Only neighboring peasants who know nothing."

"But Pan Pelka, has he returned? He is a splendid partisan."

"Your Majesty," said the starosta of Lomjin, from behind the chair. "Pan Pelka has not returned, and he will not, for he is killed."

A moment of silence followed. The king fixed his gloomy look on the flickering light, and began to drum with his fingers on the table. "Have you no help?" asked he at length.

"Wait!" said the chancellor, with importance.

The forehead of Yan Kazimir was covered with wrinkles. "Wait?" repeated he; "and Vishnyevetski and the commanders will be in worse condition under Zbaraj."

"They will hold out awhile yet," said Radzeyovski, carelessly.

"You might be silent if you have nothing good to offer," said the king.

"I have my own counsel, your Majesty."

"What is it?"

"To send some one as if to negotiate with Hmelnitski at Zbaraj. The envoy will discover whether the Khan is there in his own person, and will report when he returns."

"Impossible!" said the king. "Now when we have proclaimed him a rebel and laid a price on his head, have given the baton of the Zaporojians to Zabuski, it is not becoming our dignity to enter into negotiations with him."

"Then send to the Khan," said the starosta.

The king turned an inquiring glance on the chancellor, who raised upon him his blue, severe eye, and after a moment's thought answered: "The counsel would be good were it not that Hmelnitski, beyond a doubt, would detain the envoy, and for this reason it would serve no purpose."

Yan Kazimir waved his hand. "I see," said he, slowly, "that you have no plan; then I will tell you mine. I will order to horse, and move with the whole army to Zbaraj. Let the will of God be done! There we shall discover whether the Khan is present or not."

The chancellor knew the daring of the king, restrainable by nothing, and he doubted not that he was ready to do this. On the other hand he knew from experience that when the king had something in view and was opposed in the undertaking, no dissuasion was of avail. Therefore he did not oppose him at once, he even praised the idea; but he dissuaded from haste, explained to the king that it could be done to-morrow or the day after. In the mean while favorable news might come. Every day would increase the dissension of the rabble, weakened by disasters at Zbaraj and by the news of his Majesty's approach. The rebellion might dissolve from the presence of the king, as snow from the rays of the sun, but time was necessary.

"The king bears within himself the salvation of the whole Commonwealth, and responsibility before God and posterity. He should not expose himself, especially since, in case of misfortune, the forces at Zbaraj would be lost beyond redemption."

"Do what you like, if I only have an informant to-morrow."

Again a moment of silence. An enormous golden moon shone in through the window; but it was darker in the room, for the tapers needed trimming.

"What o'clock?" asked the king.

"Almost midnight," answered Radzeyovski.

"I will not sleep to-night. I will go around the camp, and do you go with me. Where are Ubald and Artsishevski?"

"In the camp. I will go and order the horses," answered the starosta.

He approached the door. At that moment there was some movement in the antechamber; a lively conversation was audible, the sound of hurried steps; then the doors opened half-way, and Tyzenhauz, the personal attendant of the king, rushed in panting.

"Your Majesty," cried he, "an officer has come from Zbaraj!"

The king sprang from his chair; the chancellor rose too, and from the mouths of both came the cry: "Impossible!"

"Yes, he is standing in the antechamber."

"Bring him here!" cried the king, clapping his hands. "Let him end our anxiety. This way with him, in the name of the Most Holy Mother!"

Tyzenhauz vanished through the door, and after a moment there appeared instead of him some tall, unknown form.

"Nearer!" cried the king, "nearer! We are glad to see you."

The officer pushed up to the table; and at sight of him, the king, the chancellor, and the starosta of Lomjin drew back in astonishment. Before them stood a kind of frightful-looking man, or rather an apparition. Rags torn to shreds barely covered his emaciated body; his face was blue, covered with mud and blood, his eyes burning with feverish light; his black tangled beard fell toward his breast; the odor of corpses went forth from him round about, and his legs trembled to such a degree that he was forced to lean on the table.

The king and the two dignitaries looked on him with staring eyes. At that moment the doors opened and a crowd of dignitaries, military and civil, came in; and among them, the generals Ubald and Artsishevski, with Sapieha, vice-chancellor of Lithuania. All stood behind the king, looking at the newly arrived.

The king asked: "Who are you?"

The miserable-looking man tried to speak, but a spasm seized his jaw; his beard began to tremble, and he was able only to whisper: "From — Zbaraj!"

"Give him wine!" said a voice.

In the twinkle of an eye a goblet was filled; he drank it with difficulty. By this time the chancellor had taken off his own cloak and covered the man's shoulders with it.

"Can you speak now?" inquired the king after a time.

"I can," he answered, with a voice of more confidence.

"Who are you?"

"Yan Skshetuski, colonel of hussars."

"In whose service?"

"The voevoda of Rus."

A murmur spread through the hall.

"What news have you, what news have you?" asked the king, feverishly.

"Suffering — hunger — the grave —"

The king covered his eyes. "Jesus of Nazareth! Jesus of Nazareth!" said he in a low voice. After a while he asked again: "Can you hold out long?"

"There is lack of powder. The enemy is on the ramparts."

"In force?"

"Hmelnitski — the Khan with all his hordes."

"Is the Khan there?"

"He is."

Deep silence followed. Those present looked at one another; uncertainty was on every face.

"How could you hold out?" asked the chancellor, with an accent of doubt.

At these words Skshetuski raised his head, as if new power entered him. A flash of pride passed over his face, and he answered with a voice strong beyond expectation: "Twenty assaults repulsed, sixteen battles in the field won, seventy-five sallies."

Again silence followed.

Then the king straightened himself, shook his wig as a lion would his mane, on his sallow face came out a blush, and his eyes flashed. "As God lives!" cried he, "I've enough of these councils, of this halting, of this delay! Whether the Khan is there or not, whether the general militia has come or not, I have enough of this! We will move to-day on Zbaraj."

"To Zbaraj! to Zbaraj!" was repeated by a number of powerful voices.

The face of the newly arrived brightened like the dawn. "Your Majesty, we will live and die with you."

At these words the noble heart of the king grew soft as wax, and without regarding the repulsive appearance of the knight, he pressed his head with his hands and said: "You are dearer to me than others in satin. By the Most Holy Mother, men for less service are rewarded with starostaships. But what you have done will not pass unrewarded. I am your debtor."

Others began immediately to call out after the king: "There has been no greater knight!" "He is the first among the men of Zbaraj!" "You have won immortal glory!"

"And how did you push through the Cossacks and Tartars?"

"I hid in the swamp, the reeds, went through the woods — got astray — ate nothing —"

"Give him to eat!" cried the king.

"To eat!" repeated others.

"Clothe him!"

"They will give you horses and clothing to-morrow," said the king again. "You shall want for nothing."

All, following the king, surpassed one another in praises of the knight. Then they began again to hurl questions at him, to which he answered with the greatest difficulty, for growing weakness had seized him; he was barely half-conscious. Meanwhile they brought him refreshments; and at the same time entered the priest Tsetsishovski, the chaplain of the king.

The dignitaries made way for him, for he was a very learned man, and respected. His word had almost more weight with the king than that of the chancellor, and from the pulpit he gave utterance to words such as few would dare to say at the Diet. The priest was surrounded then, and they began to tell him that an officer had come from Zbaraj; that the prince was there, though in hunger and wretchedness, and was still beating the Khan, who was present in his own person, as well as Hmelnitski, who during the whole past year had not lost so many men as at Zbaraj; finally, that the king was going to move to his succor, even if he had to lose his whole army.

The priest listened in silence, moving his lips and looking every moment at the emaciated knight, who was eating at the time, for the king had commanded him not to mind his

presence; and he even waited on him himself, and from time to time drank to him from a little silver goblet.

"What is the name of this knight?" asked the priest at last.

"Skshetuski."

"Yan?"

"Yes."

"Colonel with the voevoda of Rus?"

"Yes."

The priest raised his wrinkled face, prayed again, and said: "Let us praise the name of the Lord, for undiscoverable are the ways by which he brings a man to happiness and peace. Amen! I know this officer."

Skshetuski heard, and involuntarily turned his eyes to the face of the priest; but his face, form, and voice were completely unknown to him.

"You are the man out of the whole army who undertook to pass through the enemy's camp?" asked the priest.

"A worthy man tried before me, but he perished."

"The greater is your service, since after him you dared. I see by your suffering that the road must have been an awful one. God looked on your sacrifice, on your virtue, on your youth, and he led you through."

Suddenly the priest turned to Yan Kazimir. "Your gracious Majesty," said he, "it is then your unchangeable decision to march to the rescue of the voevoda of Rus?"

"To your prayers, father," answered the king, "I commit the country, the army, and myself, for I know it is an awful undertaking. But I cannot permit that the prince should perish behind those unfortunate ramparts, with such knights as this officer."

"God send down victory!" cried a number of voices.

The priest raised his hands to heaven, and silence followed in the hall. "I bless you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

"Amen!" said the king.

"Amen!" repeated all the voices.

Peace was spread over the face of Yan Kazimir after his previous suffering; but his eyes shot forth unusual gleams. Among all assembled rose the buzz of conversation about the impending campaign, for it was much doubted yet whether the king could move at once. He took his sword, however, from the table, and nodded to Tyzenhauz to gird him.

"When does your Majesty think of marching?" asked the chancellor.

"God has granted a pleasant night," said the king; "the horses will not be heated. Commander of the camp," he added, turning to the dignitaries, "order the march to be sounded!"

The commander of the camp left the room at once. Ossolinski, the chancellor, said with quiet dignity that all were not ready; that they could not move the wagons before day. But the king answered immediately: "Let that man remain to whom the wagons are dearer than the country."

The hall grew empty. Each man hastened to his standard, put everything in order, and prepared for the march. Only the king, the chancellor, the priest, with Skshetuski and Tyzenhauz, remained in the room.

"Gentlemen," said the priest, "you have learned already from this officer what you had to learn. He should now get rest, for he is barely able to stand on his feet. Allow me, your Majesty, to take him to my quarters for the night!"

"All right, father," replied the king. "Your demand is just. Let Tyzenhauz and some one else conduct him, for surely he cannot walk alone. Go, go, dear friend," said he; "no one has earned his rest better than you. And remember that I am your debtor; henceforth I shall forget myself rather than you."

Tyzenhauz caught Skshetuski under the arm and they passed into the antechamber. They met Sapieha, who supported the tottering knight on the other side. The priest went in advance, before him a boy with a lantern; but the boy carried it to no purpose, for the night was clear, calm, and warm. The great golden moon sailed over Toporoff like a boat. From the square of the camp came the bustle of men, the creaking of wagons, the noise of trumpets sounding the tattoo. At some distance, in front of the church lighted by the gleams of the moon, were already visible crowds of soldiers, infantry and cavalry. Horses were neighing in the village. To the creaking of wagons was joined the clatter of chains and the dull thump of cannon. The uproar increased every moment.

"They are moving already!" said the priest.

"On Zbaraj — to the rescue —" whispered Pan Yan. And whether from joy or from the toils he had endured, or from both together, he grew so weak that Tyzenhauz and the starosta were obliged almost to drag him along.

When they were turning to the priests' house they went among the soldiers standing in front of the building. These were the cavalry of Sapieha and the infantry of Artsishevski. Not in rank yet for the march, they stood without order, crowded in places and hindering the passage.

"Out of the road, out of the road!" cried the priest..

"Who wants the road?"

"An officer from Zbaraj —"

"With the forehead to him! with the forehead to him!" cried many voices.

A way was opened at once; but some crowded the more to see the hero. They looked with astonishment on that suffering, on that terrible face, lighted by the gleam of the moon, and they whispered in wonder: "From Zbaraj! from Zbaraj!"

The priest brought Skshetuski to the house with the greatest difficulty. After he had been bathed and washed from the mud and blood, he had him put in the bed of the priest of the place, and went out himself at once to the army, which was moving to the march.

Skshetuski was half conscious. Fever did not let him sleep immediately; he knew not where he was, or what had happened. He heard only the noise, — the tramp, the rumble of wagons, the thundering tread of infantry, the shouts of soldiers, then the blare of trumpets; and all this was mingled in his ears in one enormous sound. "The army is moving," he muttered. That sound began to retreat, to weaken, to vanish, to melt, till at last silence embraced Toporoff. Then it seemed to Skshetuski that together with the bed he was flying into some bottomless abyss.