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WITH FIRE AND SWORD

A TALE OF THE PAST

BY

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By HENRY ALTEMUS

With Fire and Sword

BOOK I.

WITH FIRE AND SWORD.

CHAPTER I.

It was a remarkable year, the year 1647, in which various portents in the heavens and on the earth foretold calamities and unusual occurrences.

The chroniclers of those days mention the fact that in the spring, the locusts swarmed in unprecedented numbers from the Wild Lands, and destroyed crops and grass; and this of itself was a prediction of a Tartar incursion. In the summer a total eclipse of the sun occurred, and shortly afterward a comet appeared in the sky. In Warsaw, there was even a grave-mound in the clouds above the city; also a cross of fire. Thereupon was proclaimed a fast, with giving of alms, for some people affirmed that a plague was to fall upon the land, and destroy the human race. At length the winter came, so mild a winter that the eldest people had never witnessed one like it. In the southern districts the waters were not held by icy fetters, but, swelled by the melting snow every morning, they overflowed their basins and flooded the banks. There were copious rainfalls and the steppes became like a vast slough. In the south, the sun was so warm that, wonder of wonders, in the province of Bratslav and in the Wild Lands, a green fleece covered the steppes and expanse in mid-December. From the bee-hives, there came a buzzing and humming, and the cattle were lowing in their enclosures. As the order of nature appeared to be changed, every one in Russia, in the expectation of unwonted occurrences, turned their anxious minds and eyes towards the Wild Lands, from which direction the danger seemed most threatening.

Meantime nothing unusual occurred on the steppes, and no battles nor encounters took place, save those that are always occurring there; of which eagles, hawks, crows, and wild beasts are the only witnesses.

For such was the nature of these lands. The last vestiges of civilized life disappeared as one went towards the south. Not far from Chigrin in the direction of the Dnieper, and from Uman in the direction of the Dniester, and then a great distance as far as the coast lakes and the sea—steppe followed steppe between the two rivers, as if framed by them. At the bend of the Dnieper, in the Nij¹ beyond the rapids, Cossack life swarmed, but upon the steppes themselves, no one lived, and only on their borders, were here and there patches which looked like islands in the midst of the sea. The country belonged in name to the Commonwealth, but it was a waste, and the Commonwealth permitted the Tartars to use it as a pasture-land. As the Cossacks, however, frequently defended it, the pasture ground was often turned into a battle-field.

How many battles were fought here, how many men were killed, has never been recorded. Eagles, hawks, and crows, alone witnessed these scenes, and whoever heard after the cawing and flapping of wings, and saw the dense flocks of birds, as they circled about one particular spot, knew that corpses and bones lay there unburied. In the long grass man hunted man, like wolves or antelopes. All might hunt who wished. The outlaw sought refuge in the wild steppes, the shepherd completely armed, guarded his flocks, the knight-errant sought adventures, robbers sought plunder, the Cossack sought the Tartar, and the Tartar sought the Cossack. It happened sometimes that whole bands defended their flocks against an army of assailants. The steppe was at the same time both desert and peopled, quiet and threatening, peaceful, yet full of danger, wild with the wilderness of desert lands, and also savages.

Occasionally a great war took place. Then the Tartar chambuls,² the Cossack regiments, and the Polish of Wallachian banners would sweep over the plains like the waves of the sea. At night, the howling of wolves responded to the neighing of horses. The beating of kettle-drums and the blasts of trumpets resounded as far as the Lake of Ovid, and on to the sea; and along the dark Kutschman border a crowd surged like a great river. The frontiers of the Commonwealth from Kamenets to the Dnieper were guarded by

¹ The name for Cossack lowlands.

² Chambul—a division of Tartar horseman.

military posts and watch towers, and one could easily know when the road had begun to swarm with people by the countless flocks of birds which, terrified at the Chambuls, flew towards the North. But when the Tartar came from the Black Forest, and forded the Dnieper from Wallachia, the birds followed him across the steppes into the southern province.

But this particular winter, the birds did not migrate noisily to the Commonwealth, as was their wont. It was quieter than usual on the steppes. At the moment when our story opens, the sun was just setting, and its red glow illumined the whole desert region. On the northern border of the steppes along the River Omelnik, to its mouth, the sharpest eye could not have detected a living being, nor the slightest motion in the dark, dry, withered grass of the plains. The sun's bright disk was half below the horizon; the sky by degrees became darker and darker, and gloom gradually settled upon the steppes. On the left bank of the river, upon a tiny elevation, that looked more like a grave-mound than a hill, were the ruins of a fortified military post that had been built by Teodoryk Buchat-ski, and afterwards destroyed by invaders. The ruins cast a long shadow. Not far from them gleamed the waters of the River Omelnik, that from its far distant source wound along to empty its waters into the Dnieper. But the last gleam of light was gradually dying out from the earth and sky. From above, the cry of the cranes alone was to be heard as they winged their way to the sea; no other sound broke the stillness.

Night shrouded the desert, and with its shadows came the hour when spectral visitors haunt the earth. At such times, the knights on guard at the post related stories to one another of how at night in the Wild Lands the shades of those who had been killed, and who had been snatched away in the midst of their sins, would rise from their death sleep and dance in circles without hindrance from cross or church. And when at the hour of midnight the candles began to burn down, prayers were offered up for the dead. It was said also that the ghosts of men on horseback scampered across the waste to overtake wayfarers, wailing and pleading with them for a sign of the Holy Cross; and that among these were also vampires who hunted people with howlings. The practiced ear could distinguish from afar the howling of the vampire from that of a wolf. Sometimes whole legions of ghosts appeared and came so near to the post that the sentries gave