

Khmelnysky and the Soothsayer

Ivan Franko

When Khmelnysky, who had been sentenced to death by Hetman Potocki, escaped from jail and was heading for the Sich, he happened one evening to be riding past a large forest. Afraid of falling into the hands of the hetman's posse in the darkness, he turned his horse into the forest, intending to spend the night beneath an oak tree.

As long as the path was good, he rode his horse. When he entered a thicket and the twilight obscured his vision, the lord captain of Chyhyryn had to get off his horse, take him by the reins, and lead him on, feeling about for the path with his feet.

When he thought he had gone quite far from the forest's edge, he gazed around amid the impenetrable thicket, searching for a suitable spot to spend the night. Looking around cautiously, he saw a light flashing nearby.

What is this, thought Khmelnysky. A posse? But no—why would a posse penetrate such an impassable thicket? Forest wardens? But there is nothing here for them to guard. A lord's hunt? But there's no sound of hunting horns or barking dogs. Maybe those are fugitives running away to the Sich, like me? In that case, I'll have some company!

Inspecting the powder in his pistols and testing the blade of the Tatar yataghan tucked into his belt, he made the sign of the cross and together with his horse slowly advanced through the thicket in the direction of the light.

When he had approached to within fifty paces, he found himself in a small clearing. In the middle, beneath an ancient oak, stood a tiny hut covered with green sod instead of straw thatch and almost completely grown into the earth. A light flickered through the lone small window. The clearing was deserted and quiet.

After ascertaining that there was no ambush, Khmelnysky tethered his horse without removing his saddle and let him graze in the small clearing. With his hand clasping the haft of the yataghan, he approached the hut and knocked on the door.

"Enter," a deep voice sounded inside, as though coming from beneath the earth.

With his foot Khmelnysky nudged open the small oak door and bending low, entered the tiny dwelling. Inside, a very old man with a long, waist-length beard white as milk was sitting next to the fireplace, drying some skewered fish.

"Good day, granddad!" said Bohdan, barely able to stand in the low earthen hut.

"Good day, Hetman!" said the old man without looking at him.

"Hetman? What kind of hetman am I?" Khmelnysky said in astonishment. "I am a poor fugitive heading for the Sich, and I request lodgings for the night."

"Sit down, Hetman. You will be my guest!" said the old man, still staring calmly into the red flames of the fire.

Khmelnysky sat down on the long oak bench near the window, making sure that his broad shoulders covered the window so that no light would flicker outside.

"Don't worry, Hetman," said the old man, as though guessing his thoughts. "Here you are safe. Still, you cannot avoid what is predestined for you."

"Ah, so you're one of those!" said Bohdan, smiling. "You know how to read that mysterious book where our fate is recorded? And is my Hetmanate recorded there?"

"It is."

"Thank you for that news, granddad! Now I am safe. And I don't need to know more. Will you perhaps give me a bite to eat, or am I to lie down on an empty stomach?"

"Have a bite to eat, and then you'll lie down on an empty stomach," said the old man, and offered him a freshly dried fish from his skewer. Stepping up to the fireplace, Khmelnysky ripped off the head of the fish and threw it into the fire. Then he bit into it like a starving man, without splitting or gutting it.

At that very moment he felt something cold and slippery in his hand and his mouth. He looked down and saw a huge, headless serpent writhing in his hand. He spat out what he had bitten off and that, too, was a morsel of the snake. With horror and disgust he cast the revolting food away from him. The old man continued to stare into the flames of the fire.

"What is this?" asked Khmelnysky, who had recovered from his momentary fright.

"Go to sleep, Hetman," said the old man. "I have no other food for you, and now is not the time to talk about the meaning of what you saw. You will find out tomorrow."

Khmelnysky left the house, spread his felt cloak beneath the oak tree, and lay down. Although tired from his full day's journey, he could not sleep. His body still trembled from fright, and his eyes gazed immovably into the darkness. Stars shone in the heavens, and from this spot their light seemed odd and unusual. A kind of mournful sighing stirred through the leaves and branches of the old oak, touching some deep, dark strings in Bohdan's heart. Strange thoughts flashed in his head, like quiet distant bolts

of lightning heralding an approaching storm.

It was late before he fell asleep, but in the morning his faithful horse awakened him early, tugging at his sleeve with his teeth. Bohdan sprang up and washed himself at the nearby well. After saying his morning prayer, he approached the old man's house. The old man was already awake and came out to meet him.

"Did you sleep well, Hetman? Come, now, let's have breakfast."

They entered the house. The small bench was covered with a luxurious Turkish kilim. A small round table, carved from the stump of an oak and covered with brocade, stood in the middle of the earthen hut.

"No, granddad—I don't want your fish!" said Bohdan with disgust, remembering yesterday's incident.

"Have no fear, Hetman! Yesterday was a prophetic hour, but not today. Just sit down and fortify yourself. See, I will eat too."

Bohdan sat down. Hunger overcame his squeamishness, and the old man's fish turned out to be tasty. They ate in silence. Then the old man, frowning his thick eyebrows, looked at Bohdan. As though continuing a string of mysterious thoughts, he said:

"You did well, Hetman, to tear off its head yesterday."

At these words Bohdan raised his eyes and gazed at the old man.

"If you had bitten into it without tearing off its head, it would have killed you."

"Does that mean that I will tear off the head of the hostile force pressing hard on Ukraine and it will not kill me?"

The old man nodded. For a long moment he remained silent. Then he spoke again as though from the depths of his thoughts.

"But it is not a good sign that you threw it down but not into the fire. I saw where it fell. But when I looked for it later, I could no longer find it."

"That means it came back to life! Does that mean it will live without its head? Does that mean I will not vanquish it completely?" Bohdan cried.

The old man hung his head gloomily. Both of them were silent for a long time.

"But tell me one thing, old man," Bohdan finally spoke. "Yesterday, you gave me a fish?"

"Yes."

"Then why did it turn into a serpent in my hands?"

"I tell you: it was a prophetic hour."

"But what does it foretell that it turned specifically into a serpent, into such filth?"

The old man considered for a moment.

"No doubt, you have heard, Hetman, or perhaps you have read the tale of St. Peter. They say that St. Peter, in wandering through the world, once entered a desert. For three days he could not find a single soul. He became

very hungry and began praying to God to give him something to eat. All of a sudden, a serpent crawled out from beneath the rock on which he was kneeling. And from the heavens he heard a voice: 'Peter, take it and eat!' But Peter drew back in horror and said: 'Lord, this is filth!' And the voice replies: 'Fear not, everything is clean to one who is pure!' And St. Peter stretched out his hand, took the snake, and lo and behold, it had turned into a dried fish."

"Well, old man, that's the exact opposite of what happened to me," Bohdan cried.

"Yes, Hetman, but you are not St. Peter. And the deed that you are to carry out in Ukraine...."

"Enough, old man, enough!" said Bohdan, standing up. Bidding goodbye to the old man, he left the earthen hut and set out on his journey.

Translated by Marta D. Olynyk

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