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(1939 -)

A GAME OF CHESS

Prince Roman was fleshing his sword with the Lachs and Magyars somewhere in the west. Prince Vsevolod in the north was beset by his own troubles, while the prince who had been expelled from Kiev was secretly rallying forces to recapture the throne. He sent his messengers to the Chernigovans, to the Polovtsians of the steppe, and to the Wallachian boyars, and they all agreed to advance on Kiev.

Still, there were some Wallachians who remained loyal to Kiev. They sent their message to the Kievans about the gathering danger.

For the third day now Matviyko was galloping with this message to Kiev. He could have been at the walls of the golden-domed city by the evening of the day before, but as ill luck would have it Polovtsian horsemen spied him. Arrows sped his way. The second horse he led on a bridle behind him was on the point of collapse, pulling on his saddled mount. Matviyko just managed to cut the bridle with his old dagger, and the second horse hurtled to the clayey bottom of a ravine.

The Polovtsians were hot on his trail for a long time, but their horses, accustomed to the level steppe, could not overtake the messenger on sloping terrain. Besides, Matviyko aimed for the untrodden paths and rode into the scrub, for it was difficult to shake off the horde on the highroad.

His mount went on plodding through the scrub and ravines toward Kiev; Perepetove Field was left behind, somewhere to the right. There was only one more obstacle to overcome — the Lybid River. It was not far away, behind the hills ahead. Further on there came the Kopyriv Terminus and the Lviv Gate which was guarded by loyal men. Once he had delivered the message, Matviyko would man the walls to fight the treacherous prince and his hirelings.

Presently his bay Orlyk swayed once, a second time, and then once more, and trudged on slowly, reeling like a drunk.

Matviyko lashed Orlyk for the first time in two years. But the mount only bobbed its head and its skin quivered all along its body.

I'll unsaddle him, Matviyko decided. Let him graze and rest. He jumped to the ground, but his legs would not support him and he rolled onto the grass. He got up on tottering feet, walked over to Orlyk and unsaddled him. He saw mucous sores under the saddle. Matviyko started, thinking: It's a sin to saddle him again. I'll go on foot. But his legs had grown numb and heavy. It was difficult for him to take a step. The lad made himself comfortable by the ruins of a Latin chapel. Once the Latin monks used to own the ponds here and they built this chapel. Now all the ponds were overgrown with weeds, and the chapel had fallen to ruin.

Matviyko straightened his shoulders, leaned against the wood logs, and stretched out his legs. After a sweet yawn, he said out loud:

"I'll rest a bit and then move on. When I'll get tired, I'll jump into the saddle again..."

A branch seemed to have snapped somewhere. Then another snapping sound reached his ear.

He snatched an arrow from his quiver, made the sign of the cross over the arrowhead, and strung the arrow.

A voice spoke from behind a bush in the darkness:

"Don't make the sign of the cross over the arrow!"

Without a word, Matviyko went down on one knee and released the arrow in the direction of the voice. The bowstring twanged, and a piece of dry wood rang out in the darkness. A Latin padre emerged from behind the bush. He was of a shortish, robust build. In his left hand he held a checkered shield resembling a black-and-white chessboard. Matviyko's arrow was stuck in the middle of the shield. The white face under the cowl spoke in a strange voice which, though a man's, sounded more like a woman's.

"Drop your weapon. We'll compete for your life on the chess field." The padre pulled the arrow out of the shield with his thin white fingers, and threw the arrow to Matviyko's feet. Only now did the lad notice that the shield actually was a chessboard. The padre sat down, and when he had settled, Matviyko saw that the outlander had yellow Polovtsian boots on his feet.

By then the padre was spilling chiseled chessmen out of a sleeve of his black habit. With a rattling sound resembling hoof beats, the two hosts were arrayed on the black-and-white chessboard.

The padre took one pawn from each host and hid them behind his back. Then he stretched out his clenched fists. Matviyko touched the padre's left and felt a shiver running 'down his spine. He had got the white pawn. The first move was his. He moved his pawn ahead from the right flank. The padre responded with an identical move. Then they exchanged chessmen. At first they exchanged quickly, and then slower and slower — each took his time.

Matviyko began to feel cold. The dew on the grass shone with a pearly glitter.

The sharp-pointed crescent rose into the sky and was soon enveloped by a dry yellow fog.

Matviyko's horse neighed alarmingly. The lad turned round — Orlyk was nowhere in sight. When he looked ahead, he saw the padre frozen over the chessboard, his pale face propped on a little white hand. That instant Matviyko noticed that the padre had an additional pawn.

The horse neighed again. Matviyko turned round — he couldn't see anything behind him. Then he looked at the chessboard — yet another black pawn had appeared there. He made the sign of the cross over the board, but the pawn did not disappear.

"The sign of the cross won't help you any, my lad," the padre said with a laugh, and took his pawn.

Matviyko recalled the magic power of innocent dew. He pushed his fingers into the cold grass, scooped up a handful of dew, and spilled it onto the chessboard.

The dewdrops clattered against the dried wood, and the next instant the chessmen Matviyko had lost reappeared. But the padre knew the game well and soon beat the lad's pawns and took his knight and rook.

A look at the board made Matviyko's heart contract with fear as he remembered seeing a similar layout of chessmen. Another four moves and his king would die. And after this death it would be his turn.

The lad pushed his hand into the dewy grass and drew a circle around himself in the air. The dew dropped heavily onto the ground, while his hand grew numb with cold. A chill hit his face:

the padre stood over him, his eyes concealed under the cowl — only his chin and thin gray lips were visible.

"You're fending off the inevitable in vain! Any moment now the sun will rise, dry up the dew, and you will die! Look!"

Matviyko turned his head in the direction the padre was pointing. There the dawn was flaring in a vivid red. But there was something odd about this breaking day — it unfolded in the south.

A trick! It's all a trick!

Matviyko jumped to his feet and flung dew into the padre's face. That very instant the face disappeared, and only the wind puffed out the empty habit with the sharp-pointed cowl.

Seized with rage, Matviyko kicked the chessboard that, along with the chessmen, rolled down the hill with a horrible clatter, making the hill tremble and rock.

Hundreds of horses whinnied in a hollow somewhere.

Matviyko realized that he was sleeping and having a nightmare. In his sleep, he thought, I'm sleeping... the Polovtsians are galloping to the Kievan walls, while I'm sleeping... no, no, I'm not sleeping!

He uttered a faint cry, which jolted him out of his dream, and then he jumped to his feet.

High up in the sky, the filling and glittering new moon shone through a light snow which was slowly blanketing the hills, and in the deep valley below, the Polovtsian horses were drifting by in black stream after black stream. Matviyko ran up to his bay and seized the bridle with cramped fingers. He jumped right onto the mucous sores on Orlyk's bare back. The horse almost went down from pain.

But now Matviyko did not think of anything, because Kiev could fall at dawn!

Without any cap on his head, his bow and arrows lost on the hill, and his boots with only one bootleg left, he raced downhill toward the Lybid.

Presently he saw the blue of the ice shimmering beneath the crescent.

A steep slope was the last obstacle on his way to the river.

His loyal Orlyk, bending his hind legs so low that his tail almost swept the snow, was laboriously descending toward the river.

One more effort and he would reach his goal.

But Orlyk tripped on a root, dropped sideways and rolled down, right down onto the ice, his broken forelegs leaving a steaming track of blood on the virgin snow.

Matviyko rolled down the slope after his mount. He jumped up and ran across the ice.

Orlyk neighed in deadly despair behind him. Matviyko turned around and ran back. He seized the cheek piece with his left hand, and closing his eyes, plunged the dagger into Orlyk's windpipe at the throatlatch.

A warm stream of blood drenched his feet, bespattering his kaftan and hands, but Matviyko did not notice anything — he was in a hurry to get to the far bank. He clambered up the slippery slope, losing his footing several times and rolling down, but he clambered on with dogged persistence, grabbing at any root or branch he came across.

In the end, he reached the top, where there was a sparse growth of mighty oak trees. A dying wind was rustling in their frozen browned leaves.

At long last he saw the city in the early morning mist.

Though he seemed to be wide-awake, he saw that the dawn really was ripening into day in the south beyond the city. But it was creeping on somewhat weirdly — low over the ground and in fitful flashes, making the cupolas of the Kiev cathedrals glitter in gold.

The strange dawn swelled imperially, growing brighter and engulfing the city's buildings in flames. From afar Matviyko heard the tumultuous toll of bells sounding the alarm.
Thus commenced Christmastide in Kiev in the year of 1203.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko