

Khlit

by Harold Lamb, 1892-1962

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I

When the noonday sun struck through clouds and fell upon the saber on his knee, Khlit made up his mind it was time to eat. Putting aside the sheepskin rag with which he had been wiping specks of rust from his weapon, Khlit drew from the pocket of his coat several hard barley cakes. These he broke over the silver heel of his boot and munched. Thus did Khlit satisfy his noonday hunger.

All the forenoon, seated beside one of the streets of the Zaporogian *Siech*, as the Cossacks of the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth century called their isolated war encampment—an island midway between the Russian and the Tatar banks of the great river Dnieper—Khlit had been polishing his cherished saber, a curved Turkish blade, of Damascus forging. That morning, when he had awakened, after a night of wine-guzzling, Khlit had heard rumors of war banded

about the kurens, or barracks, and like the scent of game to a wolfhound, the tidings had set the warrior to nursing his sword.

Peering out under shaggy brows, the keen eyes of the Cossack, which every now and then sought the river, noticed a stirring among the *kurens*. Knights of the Siech were gathering in groups, to learn if there was truth in the rumors. As the hammering on blacksmith forges became louder, young Cossacks sprang to horse.

Khlit sat still, sheepskin hat on the back of his sunburned head, bald save for the long scalp lock that trailed over his shoulders. His gray sheepskin coat was flung back under the rays of a midday sun, a broad leather belt making it fast at the waist. The warrior's costly nankeen breeches of brilliant red were tucked in his heavy boots. A short pipe stuck out from under his long gray mustaches.

In Khlit's mind the matter was clear enough. He could not understand why comrades bickered and bayed like dogs about war when all the Koshevoi Ataman, their leader, needed to do was to say the word and forth the Zaporogian Siech would fare, thousands in number, the flower of the world's knighthood, ready to take the field against Turk, Tatar, Pole, or other foe of the Orthodox Church.

Why, wondered Khlit, was there any hesitation, when their godfather, the Czar himself, had appointed them watchdogs of the Ukraine and the Russian land? Watchdogs of stout heart and good red blood did not lie in kennels and stuff their carcasses with food. Nor did they wait for an adversary to come to the kennel door and poke a stick at them before they sallied forth. Why then, the Cossack asked himself, did the flower of the Ukraine linger on the island encampment in the middle of the wide Dnieper and waste the strength and sinews of the young men in mimic battles suited to the entertainment of women, not full-grown men?

In a people where few grow old before cut down by an enemy sword, Khlit had been fortunate to survive many wars. The old knight had marched into Poland and he had laid waste the territory of the khans hundreds of versts away across the Volga. In his cottage in the village of Rusk he kept treasures of these campaigns, weapons wrested from the unbelievers, ransoms gleaned from wealthy Turks, and pillage from sacked towns. But the eyes of Khlit did not turn toward the cottage. They searched the distant banks of the Dnieper where foes might be found. If his thoughts wandered to home, it was to the young Cossacks who were coming to the Siech from the village that day, and especially to Menelitz, his foster son who would join him before sundown.

A shout from a nearby group attracted his attention. Several Cossacks were crouched over dice, and a burly warrior who seemed to have met with bad fortune stood up with a curse. Hesitating a second, he tore off his heavy coat and boots and threw them on the ground. His sword had been claimed by his adversary as payment for all debts, and he signified that he would wager his coat and shoes against the sword, which he was loath to relinquish.

Those in the ring about them peered at the dice casually as the big Cossack threw, and one clapped him on the back with a loud laugh as the result was known. He had won.

Next the Cossack wagered his coat and shoes against some gold sequins of his adversary, a thin, hook-nosed warrior with a scarred cheek. He lost.

Refusing all offers of further wagers, the Cossack thrust his sword in his belt and marched off up the street, swaying a little from the effects of drink. Coming abreast of Khlit he halted irresolutely.

"A health to you, noble sir," he muttered, raising a huge hand in drink-solemn greeting. "You are of the Rusk *kuren*? I know you among many, Khlit, bogatyr. That son of a devil's dog, Taravitch, diced me out of coat and shoes. And with the young Cossack brood coming from Rusk to our *kuren* tonight."

"Have you other boots, or money to buy them? There is talk of war," said Khlit after a moment's inspection of the other, whose face he now recognized.

"Hey—money?" The giant shook his head and grinned. "I gave the silver in my heels to the Jews for corn brandy last night. I have not the smell of a sequin."

"Then say to the *hetman* of our *kuren*," replied Khlit, "that I bid him give you boots and whatever you may need. There will be war, and the Siech will march."

"Hey—that is good," chuckled the Cossack. "I shall swagger before the striplings tonight."

"You can thank your sword for it, offspring of swine," explained Khlit, "for you would not lose that. A Cossack and his sword are one until death."

The giant shook his head, as though he did not grasp this piece of wisdom. Staggering, he went on his way, but no more wine was to pass his bearded lips. The magic word "war" was a talisman that brought the light of anticipation to his bloodshot eyes and purpose to his heavy steps. When the Siech went to war no drunkards were tolerated.

Khlit looked up a second time to find Taravitch, the successful gambler, watching him. Khlit mistrusted Taravitch, for the hook-nosed Cossack was a person rare among the folk of the Siech, a shrewd getter of money. To the open-handed warriors money was only a means to wine and weapons, to cherish it for itself was a symptom of the malady that afflicted the Jewish camp followers. Taravitch was known to be a winner at dice or other games, a hard bargainer, and a heartless creditor. Many of the Cossacks had been poor and worse than poor for years at a stretch for owing Taravitch money.

On the other hand Taravitch had no love for Khlit, whose name was coupled with much spoil and riches, and who was forever urging the men of the Ukraine to war, when the camp proved more profitable to Taravitch. If the truth were known, Khlit wasted no words of ceremony in speaking of the gambler, and some of these remarks had come to the ears of the other.

Several of the Cossacks who had been watching the dice stood beside Taravitch and contemplated Khlit as the latter, his meal ended long since, wiped at his saber with the sheepskin cloth. Finally Taravitch was moved to speak.

"Hail to you, Khlit," he said, mouthing his words and watching the other the while. "Do you polish your saber to show the young men who come to the Rusk *kuren* at sundown today? Or are you ready to give it to a better warrior and return to your cottage with the women?"

There was a laugh at this from the watchers, but Khlit did not even look up.

"I have heard," continued Taravitch, "that the young men from Rusk are not as fine a lot as when we smoked our pipes in the ruins of Anatolian churches. Devil take them! None of the lot will come to camp as we did; like a good knight, with a brave display."

As it is the first test of his knighthood, the manner of a stripling's coming to the Siech for the first time, when he is of age, is taken as a measure of his bravery. If he comes gaily appareled and well mounted with a crowd of companions and makes his horse go through feats before the hetmans, he is well received. If he enters camp timidly, or shows any fear, he is held in dishonor by the Cossacks.

"Health to you, Taravitch," responded Khlit carelessly. "Do you watch when the son of Menelitza, my foster son, comes to the Siech. It will be a sight to brighten your heart. He is the offspring of a *bogatyr*—bred from a stock that excelled in courage all in our Russian land."

"Nay, Khlit," said Taravitch, his eyes narrowing as when he seized an advantage at dice. "The young Cossacks are weaklings. They are schooled in books and weaned by women. There are none in these days to leap their horse over the palisade about the Siech, breaking both their necks as Borodagy did once, or to come bearing a whole cask of wine on their shoulder for the Koshevoi Ataman and the hetmans."

"We will see, Taravitch," said Khlit.

"It will be poor sport," replied the gambler in scorn. "Perchance your Menelitza will have courage enough to ride a horse and make the beast stand on three legs before us. A woman's feat!"

"The son of Menelitza," said Khlit slowly, "will come to the Siech as no other before him has come. You will see—"

"Hey!" Taravitch swung round on the spectators, but his glance still measured the old Cossack. "What nonsense are you mouthing? Do you think we are children, to believe that? Your precious Menelitza will come with a crowd, and none can tell him from the others!"

"The father of Menelitza ran his horse through a Tatar camp to fetch me from the grasp of the khan," said Khlit, unmoved, "and Menelitza will show you a feat of daring that will warm the hearts of the old men."

"A wager," cried Taravitch, "that Menelitza, who comes to the Siech at sundown, will not surpass all others in a feat of daring! My Arab stallion against a hundred sequins of gold. Ha, old fox, where is your valor?"

"No man has asked that upon the battlefield, Taravitch," replied Khlit, "but you shall have your wager. Only it will be a man's wager, not a child's plaything."

He paused and looked up calmly at the circle that pressed about them.

"In my house at Rusk," he went on, "are fifty goblets of silver and gold taken from the enemies of the Siech, Persian carpets several in number, rare swords from Turkey, four horses of the finest blood. Also Polish trophies and gold-chased armor, with a thousand sequins of gold. All this will I wager against your coin of five thousand sequins and your Arab horses. Come now, are you a staunch wold, Taravitch, or a rabbit that dives into his burrow when he sees a man?"

Taravitch gazed at the Cossack as if fascinated. His eyes narrowed as he wet his lips. The riches Khlit had mentioned, he knew to be in the cottage at Rusk. Also, if Khlit pledged his word before witnesses the promise was good. Yet never had the gambler staked the bulk of his wealth on any one throw. The prospect dazzled him.

"Menelitza comes today, Khlit?" he asked, weighing his words.

"He has promised me," assented the old man.

“Then it is a wager.” Taravitch turned to the watchers, who gaped at him. “You have heard the terms,” he cried, “and the wager—that Menelitzza comes today to the Siech as none other has come before him. The wager is offered and accepted.”

II

The sun, which had been high, was nearing the Russian bank of the Dnieper when the burly Cossack who had been befriended by old Khlit returned to the spot and found his benefactor seated where he had been before. The bright saber still reflected sun’s rays. Khlit glanced up as he approached. The Cossack was again without coat and boots.

“Devil take you,” Khlit said affectionately. “Can’t you keep a coat upon your fat back? But tell me, is there any news of the approach of men from Rusk? It draws near sundown.”

“Hey, old sword-eater,” growled the Cossack, “I have heard of the wager you made. News of it has got from one end of the camp to the other. The noble knights are all watching to see the result. Nay, I gave your coat and boots away to one who needed them.”

“Have the men from Rusk been sighted?”

“Hey? I don’t know. Taravitch was talking about it to the who has charge of the ferry and the good man said he’d be flogged with a saber if the Dnieper wasn’t rising and jumping about with the wind so much that it were a perilous task to take out the boat from shore. Besides, the oars are lost. So the fine fellow who pilots the boat told me.”

“Lost!” Khlit’s glance flickered over the Cossack. “Devil take the rascal, has he but the one boat? Where are the others?”

“Away up the river, Khlit,” responded the big warrior with a hearty laugh at the discomfiture of his friend, “and old Father Dnieper is growling to himself and gnashing his white teeth at the wind. Did Menelitzza swear he would be in camp this day?”

“He swore it on a holy image, Waggle-Tongue,” Khlit made reply, inspecting his sword. “And Menelitzza does not waste his words for love of hearing himself bray. He will come at sundown.”

The Cossack gazed at Khlit’s shiny black boots admiringly.

“So you say, Khlit, bogatyr,” he mused, “and the noble sirs maintain that good sharp sword, or well-loaded pistol. Still, how can the son of your comrade arrive here when the ferryman has drunk two dozen glasses of corn brandy with that slimy lizard of a Taravitch, and Father Dnieper is shaking his hair in anger?”

“Did Taravitch make the ferryman drunk?” demanded Khlit thoughtfully.

“Aye, with corn brandy. And the oars are not to be found—”

“Did Taravitch hide them?”

“Hey? Most like. If a warrior will do one mischief he will not hold his hand at two. He has you by the scalp lock, Khlit, and your riches are as good as in his pocket.”

“It is not sundown.”

“Nay, but the sun kisses his bed behind the mountains. Already the crowd of noble sirs who have gathered in the center of the Siech to watch for the fulfillment of your wager say that you have lost. Talk turns to the rumors of a Tatar khan seen near Rusk. Hey, but that is good news.”

“Then we will hear it,” declared Khlit.

Sheathing his sword, he tightened his belt and strode along by the giant, his gray eyes almost hidden under shaggy brows, his hands thrust idly in his pockets. As he went, Cossacks turned to look after him, for tidings of the great wager had stirred the interest of the Siech. Groups gathered in the center square of the Siech made way for him until the pair stood within arm’s reach of the Koshevoi Ataman and the hetmans who were discussing the appearance of the Tatars in the Ukraine.

“The khan has spread his wings near Rusk, Khlit,” said one of the hetmans. “The Tatar dogs took a *batko* of the Orthodox Church and burned him for the village to see. That was an ill deed. They have also burned our churches. The Zaporogian Siech girds itself for war.”

Khlit tugged at his mustache with pleasure.

“That is a good word in my ears, noble sir,” he grinned. “Are all the worthy knights in favor of setting out?”

“Nay, Khlit,” the *hetman* shook his shaggy head, “there are many who say the burning of one *batko* is not enough to make the Siech set out. Methinks they are the dogs who like to lie in the sun and scratch. They say the messenger who brought the tidings lies, and that it is a plot of those who want war.”

“Who is the messenger?” demanded Khlit, frowning.

“Yon fellow in the big cloak and new boots. He came to the camp in sore plight. He swears the Khan is near Rusk.”

Khlit’s gaze fell on a slender Cossack, dark-skinned, who stood quietly before the Koshevoi Ataman, watching the warriors around him curiously. The stranger seemed not to interest Khlit.

“Hey,” said the giant, “he is the vagabond I gave my coat and boots to. He came to me near the ferry—”

He was silenced by murmurs from a group of Cossacks who stood near, and who began to address the Koshevoi Ataman. One of their number thrust through the crowd hastily and Khlit pulled at his mustache as he recognized Taravitch.

“A word to the Koshevoi Ataman,” cried Taravitch in a loud voice. “This man who says that he comes from Rusk this afternoon lies, for no man has come from the shore to the island.”

“How is that, Taravitch?” asked Khlit quickly.

“It is true,” persisted the gambler. “I know, for early in the afternoon I saw the ferryman asleep by the shore, so filled with wine he could not stand. And there are no other boats. So no one could come from shore across Father Dnieper. Look!”

Taravitch pointed, and the Cossacks looked out over the river. The red glow of sunset flamed on the tossing crest of the waves, with here and there a white fleck of foam. The wind from the west slapped their faces and pulled at their beards. Truly, Father Dnieper was in no gentle mood. Taravitch, who loved better the tranquillity of the Siech than the hardships of war, smiled as he felt the amazement and concern of the gathering at his words. He had made his point.

Already he had won, he felt, a huge wager from the wise Khlit, and now he went on to drive home his plan to discredit the messenger.

The giant Cossack stepped forward, but Taravitch was before him.

“You can see for yourselves, noble sirs,” he said eagerly, “that not even one favored by God could cross these waters. No man has ever done that of himself. And it is known that the ferry has not been used—”

“You hear, noble sirs,” the deep voice of Khlit broke in, “what he said. No man has ever done that. You have heard the words of Taravitch.”

“Aye, it is the truth”—the gambler shot a puzzled glance at the warrior—“and so the man who says he comes from Rusk lies—”

“Not so, Taravitch,” Khlit cried again. “Listen to me, noble sirs. The messenger tells the truth. He is a man of honor, and he is of Rusk.”

He strode forward and clapped his hand on the young Cossack’s coat. With a twist he flung it from the other’s shoulders. The undergarment of the messenger showed strangely dark and heavy, and Khlit with another wrench wrung a stream of water from his sleeve.

“This is Menelitzza, noble sirs, son of the bogatyr,” he cried. “He has brought you tidings of war from Rusk. When there was no boat to bring him to the Siech, he swam through the waves. Many saw him swim ashore, and gave him coat and boots.”

The young Cossack’s face flushed red with the gaze of the throng and he would have stepped back, but Khlit held him firmly, searching the crowd with his gray eyes.

“This is Menelitzza,” he said again, “who has come to the Siech as none other before him. Is there any Cossack now who would speak of lies?”

Silence greeted him, until broken by the Koshevoi Ataman, who announced that the Zaporogian Siech smelled war and that the swords of the knights would no longer be rusted.

That is all of the tale of the coming of Menelitzza to the Siech, save perhaps for the word of the giant Cossack, who repeated afterward that that night, when the Siech was in slumber, he, being one of the watchmen, saw Khlit drag a pair of oars in the Siech—belonging to the ferry.

Khlit glanced around and, seeing no one near him in the gloom, carefully replaced some furs which had concealed the oars from discovery during the day. Following him, the Cossack saw Khlit carry the oars to the ferry, which lay on the shore, and place them inside.

When the noble sirs heard that, they laughed and told the big Cossack he had been drinking corn brandy, and when they asked Khlit, he also laughed and said the man had been drinking corn brandy.

