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WITH FIRE AND SWORD

A TALE OF THE PAST

BY

HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ

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BY

DR. SAMUEL A. BINION

Translator of "Quo Vadis," "Pan Michael," Etc.

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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.