

He laughed; a laugh that distorted the muscles of his face, and his eyes blinked incessantly.

"With your Highness's permission," said Stroici, "we see that our country will once more be under the heel of the heretics. When these hordes of Turks have robbed and devastated the land, over whom will your Highness reign?"

"And with what will you satisfy the greed of these heretics, whom your Highness has brought with you?" added Spancioc.

"With your possessions, not with the money of the peasants whom you fleece. You milk the country dry, but now the time has come when I will milk you dry. Enough, boyars! Return and tell him who sent you to be on his guard lest I catch him, if he would not have me make flutes out of his bones, and cases for my drums out of his skin."

The boyars retired sadly; Motzoc remained.

"Why do you stay?" asked Lapushneanu.

"Sire! Sire!" said Motzoc, falling on his knees. "Reward us not after our iniquities! Remember this is your native land, remember the scriptural admonition to forgive your enemies! Have pity on the poor land. Sire! dismiss these pagan armies; come with only a few Moldavians with you, and we will guarantee that not a hair of your Highness's head shall be touched; and if you need armies we will arm our women and our children, we will raise the country, we will call up our retainers and our neighbours. Trust yourself to us!"

"Trust myself to you?" said Lapushneanu, comprehending his plan. "Perchance you think I do not know the Moldavian proverb: 'The wolf may change his skin, but never his habits'? Perchance I do not know you, you especially? Do I not know that when my army was outnumbered, when you saw that I was defeated, you abandoned me? Veveritza is an old enemy of mine, but he has never concealed the fact; Spancioc is still young, his heart is full of love for his country; it pleases me to see his pride which he does not attempt to conceal. Stroici is a child, who does not understand men yet, and does not know the meaning of flattery, or a lie; to him it seems that all birds that fly are fit to eat. But you, Motzoc, seasoned veteran of hard times, accustomed to fawn on every ruler, you have sold the Despot; you have sold me too, and will now sell Tomsha; tell me, should I not be an arch fool to put my trust in you? Still, I pardon you for daring to think that you could cheat me, and I promise you my sword shall not stain itself with your blood; I will spare you, for you are useful to me and will help to bear my blame. The others are all drones, and the hive must be freed from them."

Motzoc kissed his hand, like the dog which, instead of biting, licks the hand that beats him. He was grateful for the promise given him. He knew that Voda Alexandru would have need of an intriguer like himself. The deputies had been commanded by Tomsha, in the event of their being unable to turn Lapushneanu from his path, to take the road to Constantinople, where by means of petitions and bribes they were to try and compass his overthrow. But seeing that he came with the good will of the Porte itself, and, moreover, fearing to return without any success to Tomsha, he begged leave to remain in his company. This was Motzoc's plan that he might himself adhere to Lapushneanu. Leave was granted him.

Tomsha, not finding himself in a position to offer resistance, fled into Valahia, and Lapushneanu found no obstacle in his path. The people round met him with joy and hope, reminding themselves of his first reign, during which he had not had time to develop his odious character.

But the boyars trembled. They had two great reasons to be anxious: they