



The Song of Wise Oleg

Oleg, the wise Prince, roused to arm,
Cried: "Vengeance on the ruthless horde
Of raiding Chosars! Field and farm
My men shall put to fire and sword!"
And when his faithful horse was brought,
He rode out with his knights and men,
In damascened, gold armour, wrought,
By some deviceful Saracen-
Before his men he rode in pride,
Their hero-prince and nothing feared;
But, ere he reached the forest-side;
From out its darkling deeps appeared
Dread Perun's prophet, old and wise,
Who studied in the secret shrine
That he might in each man's own eyes
His destiny and doom divine.
The brave Prince rode towards him, and cried:
"O Wizard, favoured of the gods,
What woe or weal shall me betide?
How soon shall I, beneath the sods,
Lie buried, while my foes rejoice?
Fear naught; nor speak with faltering words-
Whate'er my doom, be thine the choice
Of all the horses in my herds!"
"No wizard dreads an earthly lord!"
The old man scornful answer flung:
"And naught availeth bribe or sword
To loose or bind the prophet's tongue.
Heaven's secrets are not bought and sold:
The future's veiled in mist and gloom:
Yet, as a tale already told,

On thy bright brows I read thy doom."
"Mark well this day the words I speak,
For, ever, to the warrior fame
Brings solace, when he waxes weak
With years and wounds. Know thou, thy name
Is victory! The nations yield
Before thine army's dread advance:
Envied of all, thy golden shield
Hangs o'er the gate of proud Byzance."
The blue sea's treacherous waves to thee,
Though lashed to storm, no scathe shall bring:
They know thee, Lord of Victory!
Nor dread the arrow or the sling,
Or traitorous dagger; for thy life
To all is sacred; and no blow
Shall pierce thine armour in the strife
With thee an unseen guard doth go."
"Thy horse, that dreads no furious fray,
Hath borne thee well in many lands;
And like a rock amid the spray
Among the whistling shafts he stands,
Or bears thee through the brunt of spears,
Obedient to thy lightest breath:
Nor frost, nor fight, with thee he fears:
Yet, even he shall be thy death."
The brave prince beard the strange discourse,
With smiling lips, but gloomy brow:
Then, sadly, lighting from his horse,
He spake: "And must we two part now?"
(Caressing with a kindly touch,
His servant's silky neck) "Old friend,
Together, we have weathered much

Victoriously: but all things end;

*And we must part. Thou, who did'st bear
Thy lord to triumph, East and West,
Shall bear none other now, and ne'er
Shall foot in your gold stirrup rest.*

*For me, still waits the field of strife;
But thou in peaceful meads shalt dwell.*

*Until death end thy loyal life,
Forget me not, old friend. Farewell!"*

*Then turning to his grooms: "My steed
To pleasant river-pastures bring;
And bathe him daily there; and feed
Him ever on choice oats; and fling
A soft wool rug about his flanks
To keep him warm. "The horseboys led
The wondering beast back through the ranks;
And brought another horse instead.*

*Years passed. Oleg, with all his lords,
Grown old with him in fray and fight,
Feasted one summer day-their swords
Sheathed after victory; and white
As snow upon the mountain's peak,
Their hair-as of the old deeds done
In valiant youth they yet did speak,
And victories together won.*

*And where is now my comrade? Where
My faithful horse?" Oleg then asked;
Doth he on light, fleet foot still fare-
He whom no journey e'er o'ertasked-
He who ne'er stayed for strife or steep?"*

One answered: By the river-shore,

*On a high hill-top, sound asleep
He lies; and will awake no more."
Musing, Oleg bent low his head,
Remembering the days of old;
And sadly to himself he said:
"Had I not feared the doom foretold
By that old fashioner of lies,
My old friend had been with me still!"
And then he bade his lords arise;
And seek with him the burial hill.
Full-mournfully the Prince rode out
Towards the river, with his son,
The gallant Igor, thronged about
By his old warriors, till they won
Unto the Dneipr's shore, where strewn
On a high hill, 'mid sand and stones,
'Neath waving grass, in glare of noon
Lay bare the old rain-whitened bones.
With gentle foot, and bowed with grief,
Touching the skull, Oleg then said:
"Sleep well, my friend! Our day is brief;
Though I live; thou art with the dead:
Nor, at my funeral feast, fullnigh,
Sword-spilt shall thy warm life-blood fall
Upon me dead, when even I
Drop to the dust that ends us all."
And, even as these words he spake,
From out the eyeless skull there shot
A ribbon-like black deadly snake,
Which stung his foot. "Is this my lot
By that old wizard prophesied?
Death ambushed in a lifeless bone!*

*Then, welcome death!" the brave Prince cried:
And sank to earth without a moan.*

*Full-sadly as the cups went round
At the high funeral-festival,
When, Igor, on the burial mound
With Olga sat, his warriors all
Around them sitting, talked of days
When 'neath Oleg's flag they had fought
The world, and won; and sang the praise
Of him whom death had brought to naught.*

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