

Chapter III

The farther Olenin travelled from Central Russia the farther he left his memories behind, and the nearer he drew to the Caucasus the lighter his heart became. "I'll stay away for good and never return to show myself in society," was a thought that sometimes occurred to him. "These people whom I see here are NOT people. None of them know me and none of them can ever enter the Moscow society I was in or find out about my past. And no one in that society will ever know what I am doing, living among these people." And quite a new feeling of freedom from his whole past came over him among the rough beings he met on the road whom he did not consider to be PEOPLE in the sense that his Moscow acquaintances were. The rougher the people and the fewer the signs of civilization the freer he felt. Stavropol, through which he had to pass, irked him. The signboards, some of them even in French, ladies in carriages, cabs in the marketplace, and a gentleman wearing a fur cloak and tall hat who was walking along the boulevard and staring at the passersby, quite upset him. "Perhaps these people know some of my acquaintances," he thought; and the club, his tailor, cards, society ... came back to his mind. But after Stavropol everything was satisfactory--wild and also beautiful and warlike, and Olenin felt happier and happier. All the Cossacks, post-boys, and post-station masters seemed to him simple folk with whom he could jest and converse simply, without having to consider to what class they belonged. They all belonged to the human race which, without his thinking about it,

all appeared dear to Olenin, and they all treated him in a friendly way.

Already in the province of the Don Cossacks his sledge had been exchanged for a cart, and beyond Stavropol it became so warm that Olenin travelled without wearing his fur coat. It was already spring--an unexpected joyous spring for Olenin. At night he was no longer allowed to leave the Cossack villages, and they said it was dangerous to travel in the evening. Vanyusha began to be uneasy, and they carried a loaded gun in the cart. Olenin became still happier. At one of the post-stations the post-master told of a terrible murder that had been committed recently on the high road. They began to meet armed men. "So this is where it begins!" thought Olenin, and kept expecting to see the snowy mountains of which mention was so often made. Once, towards evening, the Nogay driver pointed with his whip to the mountains shrouded in clouds. Olenin looked eagerly, but it was dull and the mountains were almost hidden by the clouds. Olenin made out something grey and white and fleecy, but try as he would he could find nothing beautiful in the mountains of which he had so often read and heard. The mountains and the clouds appeared to him quite alike, and he thought the special beauty of the snow peaks, of which he had so often been told, was as much an invention as Bach's music and the love of women, in which he did not believe. So he gave up looking forward to seeing the mountains. But early next morning, being awakened in his cart by the freshness of the air, he glanced carelessly to the right. The morning was perfectly clear. Suddenly he saw, about twenty paces away as it seemed to him at first glance, pure white gigantic masses

with delicate contours, the distinct fantastic outlines of their summits showing sharply against the far-off sky. When he had realized the distance between himself and them and the sky and the whole immensity of the mountains, and felt the infinitude of all that beauty, he became afraid that it was but a phantasm or a dream. He gave himself a shake to rouse himself, but the mountains were still the same.

"What's that! What is it?" he said to the driver.

"Why, the mountains," answered the Nogay driver with indifference.

"And I too have been looking at them for a long while," said Vanyusha.

"Aren't they fine? They won't believe it at home."

The quick progress of the three-horsed cart along the smooth road caused the mountains to appear to be running along the horizon, while their rosy crests glittered in the light of the rising sun. At first Olenin was only astonished at the sight, then gladdened by it; but later on, gazing more and more intently at that snow-peaked chain that seemed to rise not from among other black mountains, but straight out of the plain, and to glide away into the distance, he began by slow degrees to be penetrated by their beauty and at length to FEEL the mountains. From that moment all he saw, all he thought, and all he felt, acquired for him a new character, sternly majestic like the mountains! All his Moscow reminiscences, shame, and repentance, and his trivial dreams about the Caucasus, vanished and did not return. 'Now it

has begun,' a solemn voice seemed to say to him. The road and the Terek, just becoming visible in the distance, and the Cossack villages and the people, all no longer appeared to him as a joke. He looked at himself or Vanyusha, and again thought of the mountains. ... Two Cossacks ride by, their guns in their cases swinging rhythmically behind their backs, the white and bay legs of their horses mingling confusedly ... and the mountains! Beyond the Terek rises the smoke from a Tartar village... and the mountains! The sun has risen and glitters on the Terek, now visible beyond the reeds ... and the mountains! From the village comes a Tartar wagon, and women, beautiful young women, pass by... and the mountains! 'Abreks canter about the plain, and here am I driving along and do not fear them! I have a gun, and strength, and youth... and the mountains!'