

## Chapter V

It was one of those wonderful evenings that occur only in the Caucasus. The sun had sunk behind the mountains but it was still light. The evening glow had spread over a third of the sky, and against its brilliancy the dull white immensity of the mountains was sharply defined. The air was rarefied, motionless, and full of sound. The shadow of the mountains reached for several miles over the steppe. The steppe, the opposite side of the river, and the roads, were all deserted. If very occasionally mounted men appeared, the Cossacks in the cordon and the Chechens in their aouls (villages) watched them with surprised curiosity and tried to guess who those questionable men could be. At nightfall people from fear of one another flock to their dwellings, and only birds and beasts fearless of man prowl in those deserted spaces. Talking merrily, the women who have been tying up the vines hurry away from the gardens before sunset. The vineyards, like all the surrounding district, are deserted, but the villages become very animated at that time of the evening. From all sides, walking, riding, or driving in their creaking carts, people move towards the village. Girls with their smocks tucked up and twigs in their hands run chatting merrily to the village gates to meet the cattle that are crowding together in a cloud of dust and mosquitoes which they bring with them from the steppe. The well-fed cows and buffaloes disperse at a run all over the streets and Cossack women in coloured beshmets go to and fro among them. You can hear their merry laughter and shrieks

mingling with the lowing of the cattle. There an armed and mounted Cossack, on leave from the cordon, rides up to a hut and, leaning towards the window, knocks. In answer to the knock the handsome head of a young woman appears at the window and you can hear caressing, laughing voices. There a tattered Nogay labourer, with prominent cheekbones, brings a load of reeds from the steppes, turns his creaking cart into the Cossack captain's broad and clean courtyard, and lifts the yoke off the oxen that stand tossing their heads while he and his master shout to one another in Tartar. Past a puddle that reaches nearly across the street, a barefooted Cossack woman with a bundle of firewood on her back makes her laborious way by clinging to the fences, holding her smock high and exposing her white legs. A Cossack returning from shooting calls out in jest: 'Lift it higher, shameless thing!' and points his gun at her. The woman lets down her smock and drops the wood. An old Cossack, returning home from fishing with his trousers tucked up and his hairy grey chest uncovered, has a net across his shoulder containing silvery fish that are still struggling; and to take a short cut climbs over his neighbour's broken fence and gives a tug to his coat which has caught on the fence. There a woman is dragging a dry branch along and from round the corner comes the sound of an axe. Cossack children, spinning their tops wherever there is a smooth place in the street, are shrieking; women are climbing over fences to avoid going round. From every chimney rises the odorous kisyak smoke. From every homestead comes the sound of increased bustle, precursor to the stillness of night.

Granny Ulitka, the wife of the Cossack cornet who is also teacher in the regimental school, goes out to the gates of her yard like the other women, and waits for the cattle which her daughter Maryanka is driving along the street. Before she has had time fully to open the wattle gate in the fence, an enormous buffalo cow surrounded by mosquitoes rushes up bellowing and squeezes in. Several well-fed cows slowly follow her, their large eyes gazing with recognition at their mistress as they swish their sides with their tails. The beautiful and shapely Maryanka enters at the gate and throwing away her switch quickly slams the gate to and rushes with all the speed of her nimble feet to separate and drive the cattle into their sheds. 'Take off your slippers, you devil's wench!' shouts her mother, 'you've worn them into holes!' Maryanka is not at all offended at being called a 'devil's wench', but accepting it as a term of endearment cheerfully goes on with her task. Her face is covered with a kerchief tied round her head. She is wearing a pink smock and a green beshmet. She disappears inside the lean-to shed in the yard, following the big fat cattle; and from the shed comes her voice as she speaks gently and persuasively to the buffalo: 'Won't she stand still? What a creature! Come now, come old dear!' Soon the girl and the old woman pass from the shed to the dairy carrying two large pots of milk, the day's yield. From the dairy chimney rises a thin cloud of kisyak smoke: the milk is being used to make into clotted cream. The girl makes up the fire while her mother goes to the gate. Twilight has fallen on the village. The air is full of the smell of vegetables, cattle, and scented kisyak smoke. From the gates and along the streets Cossack women come running, carrying lighted rags. From the

yards one hears the snorting and quiet chewing of the cattle eased of their milk, while in the street only the voices of women and children sound as they call to one another. It is rare on a week-day to hear the drunken voice of a man.

One of the Cossack wives, a tall, masculine old woman, approaches Granny Ulitka from the homestead opposite and asks her for a light. In her hand she holds a rag.

'Have you cleared up. Granny?'

'The girl is lighting the fire. Is it fire you want?' says Granny Ulitka, proud of being able to oblige her neighbour.

Both women enter the hut, and coarse hands unused to dealing with small articles tremblingly lift the lid of a matchbox, which is a rarity in the Caucasus. The masculine-looking new-comer sits down on the doorstep with the evident intention of having a chat.

'And is your man at the school. Mother?' she asked.

'He's always teaching the youngsters. Mother. But he writes that he'll come home for the holidays,' said the cornet's wife.

'Yes, he's a clever man, one sees; it all comes useful.'

'Of course it does.'

'And my Lukashka is at the cordon; they won't let him come home,' said the visitor, though the cornet's wife had known all this long ago. She wanted to talk about her Lukashka whom she had lately fitted out for service in the Cossack regiment, and whom she wished to marry to the cornet's daughter, Maryanka.

'So he's at the cordon?'

'He is. Mother. He's not been home since last holidays. The other day I sent him some shirts by Fomushkin. He says he's all right, and that his superiors are satisfied. He says they are looking out for abreks again. Lukashka is quite happy, he says.'

'Ah well, thank God,' said the cornet's wife. 'Snatcher' is certainly the only word for him.' Lukashka was surnamed 'the Snatcher' because of his bravery in snatching a boy from a watery grave, and the cornet's wife alluded to this, wishing in her turn to say something agreeable to Lukashka's mother.

'I thank God, Mother, that he's a good son! He's a fine fellow, everyone praises him,' says Lukashka's mother. 'All I wish is to get him married; then I could die in peace.'

'Well, aren't there plenty of young women in the village?' answered the

cornet's wife slyly as she carefully replaced the lid of the matchbox with her horny hands.

'Plenty, Mother, plenty,' remarked Lukashka's mother, shaking her head. 'There's your girl now, your Maryanka--that's the sort of girl! You'd have to search through the whole place to find such another!' The cornet's wife knows what Lukashka's mother is after, but though she believes him to be a good Cossack she hangs back: first because she is a cornet's wife and rich, while Lukashka is the son of a simple Cossack and fatherless, secondly because she does not want to part with her daughter yet, but chiefly because propriety demands it.

'Well, when Maryanka grows up she'll be marriageable too,' she answers soberly and modestly.

'I'll send the matchmakers to you--I'll send them! Only let me get the vineyard done and then we'll come and make our bows to you,' says Lukashka's mother. 'And we'll make our bows to Elias Vasilich too.'

'Elias, indeed!' says the cornet's wife proudly. 'It's to me you must speak! All in its own good time.'

Lukashka's mother sees by the stern face of the cornet's wife that it is not the time to say anything more just now, so she lights her rag with the match and says, rising: 'Don't refuse us, think of my words. I'll go, it is time to light the fire.'

As she crosses the road swinging the burning rag, she meets Maryanka, who bows.

'Ah, she's a regular queen, a splendid worker, that girl!' she thinks, looking at the beautiful maiden. 'What need for her to grow any more? It's time she was married and to a good home; married to Lukashka!'

But Granny Ulitka had her own cares and she remained sitting on the threshold thinking hard about something, till the girl called her.