

Chapter VI

The male population of the village spend their time on military expeditions and in the cordon--or 'at their posts', as the Cossacks say. Towards evening, that same Lukashka the Snatcher, about whom the old women had been talking, was standing on a watch-tower of the Nizhni-Prototsk post situated on the very banks of the Terek. Leaning on the railing of the tower and screwing up his eyes, he looked now far into the distance beyond the Terek, now down at his fellow Cossacks, and occasionally he addressed the latter. The sun was already approaching the snowy range that gleamed white above the fleecy clouds. The clouds undulating at the base of the mountains grew darker and darker. The clearness of evening was noticeable in the air. A sense of freshness came from the woods, though round the post it was still hot. The voices of the talking Cossacks vibrated more sonorously than before. The moving mass of the Terek's rapid brown waters contrasted more vividly with its motionless banks. The waters were beginning to subside and here and there the wet sands gleamed drab on the banks and in the shallows. The other side of the river, just opposite the cordon, was deserted; only an immense waste of low-growing reeds stretched far away to the very foot of the mountains. On the low bank, a little to one side, could be seen the flat-roofed clay houses and the funnel-shaped chimneys of a Chechen village. The sharp eyes of the Cossack who stood on the watch-tower followed, through the evening smoke of the pro-Russian village, the tiny moving figures of the

Chechen women visible in the distance in their red and blue garments.

Although the Cossacks expected abreks to cross over and attack them from the Tartar side at any moment, especially as it was May when the woods by the Terek are so dense that it is difficult to pass through them on foot and the river is shallow enough in places for a horseman to ford it, and despite the fact that a couple of days before a Cossack had arrived with a circular from the commander of the regiment announcing that spies had reported the intention of a party of some eight men to cross the Terek, and ordering special vigilance--no special vigilance was being observed in the cordon. The Cossacks, unarmed and with their horses unsaddled just as if they were at home, spent their time some in fishing, some in drinking, and some in hunting. Only the horse of the man on duty was saddled, and with its feet hobbled was moving about by the brambles near the wood, and only the sentinel had his Circassian coat on and carried a gun and sword. The corporal, a tall thin Cossack with an exceptionally long back and small hands and feet, was sitting on the earth-bank of a hut with his beshmet unbuttoned. On his face was the lazy, bored expression of a superior, and having shut his eyes he dropped his head upon the palm first of one hand and then of the other. An elderly Cossack with a broad greyish-black beard was lying in his shirt, girdled with a black strap, close to the river and gazing lazily at the waves of the Terek as they monotonously foamed and swirled. Others, also overcome by the heat and half naked, were rinsing clothes in the Terek, plaiting a fishing line, or humming tunes as they lay on the hot sand of the river

bank. One Cossack, with a thin face much burnt by the sun, lay near the hut evidently dead drunk, by a wall which though it had been in shadow some two hours previously was now exposed to the sun's fierce slanting rays.

Lukashka, who stood on the watch-tower, was a tall handsome lad about twenty years old and very like his mother. His face and whole build, in spite of the angularity of youth, indicated great strength, both physical and moral. Though he had only lately joined the Cossacks at the front, it was evident from the expression of his face and the calm assurance of his attitude that he had already acquired the somewhat proud and warlike bearing peculiar to Cossacks and to men generally who continually carry arms, and that he felt he was a Cossack and fully knew his own value. His ample Circassian coat was torn in some places, his cap was on the back of his head Chechen fashion, and his leggings had slipped below his knees. His clothing was not rich, but he wore it with that peculiar Cossack foppishness which consists in imitating the Chechen brave. Everything on a real brave is ample, ragged, and neglected, only his weapons are costly. But these ragged clothes and these weapons are belted and worn with a certain air and matched in a certain manner, neither of which can be acquired by everybody and which at once strike the eye of a Cossack or a hillsman. Lukashka had this resemblance to a brave. With his hands folded under his sword, and his eyes nearly closed, he kept looking at the distant Tartar village. Taken separately his features were not beautiful, but anyone who saw his stately carriage and his dark-browed intelligent face would

involuntarily say, 'What a fine fellow!'

'Look at the women, what a lot of them are walking about in the village,' said he in a sharp voice, languidly showing his brilliant white teeth and not addressing anyone in particular.

Nazarka who was lying below immediately lifted his head and remarked:

'They must be going for water.'

'Supposing one scared them with a gun?' said Lukashka, laughing, 'Wouldn't they be frightened?'

'It wouldn't reach.'

'What! Mine would carry beyond. Just wait a bit, and when their feast comes round I'll go and visit Girey Khan and drink buza there,' said Lukashka, angrily swishing away the mosquitoes which attached themselves to him.

A rustling in the thicket drew the Cossack's attention. A pied mongrel half-setter, searching for a scent and violently wagging its scantily furred tail, came running to the cordon. Lukashka recognized the dog as one belonging to his neighbour, Uncle Eroshka, a hunter, and saw, following it through the thicket, the approaching figure of the hunter himself.

Uncle Eroshka was a gigantic Cossack with a broad, snow-white beard and such broad shoulders and chest that in the wood, where there was no one to compare him with, he did not look particularly tall, so well proportioned were his powerful limbs. He wore a tattered coat and, over the bands with which his legs were swathed, sandals made of undressed deer's hide tied on with strings; while on his head he had a rough little white cap. He carried over one shoulder a screen to hide behind when shooting pheasants, and a bag containing a hen for luring hawks, and a small falcon; over the other shoulder, attached by a strap, was a wild cat he had killed; and stuck in his belt behind were some little bags containing bullets, gunpowder, and bread, a horse's tail to swish away the mosquitoes, a large dagger in a torn scabbard smeared with old bloodstains, and two dead pheasants. Having glanced at the cordon he stopped.

'Hy, Lyam!' he called to the dog in such a ringing bass that it awoke an echo far away in the wood; and throwing over his shoulder his big gun, of the kind the Cossacks call a 'flint', he raised his cap.

'Had a good day, good people, eh?' he said, addressing the Cossacks in the same strong and cheerful voice, quite without effort, but as loudly as if he were shouting to someone on the other bank of the river.

'Yes, yes. Uncle!' answered from all sides the voices of the young Cossacks.

'What have you seen? Tell us!' shouted Uncle Eroshka, wiping the sweat from his broad red face with the sleeve of his coat.

'Ah, there's a vulture living in the plane tree here, Uncle. As soon as night comes he begins hovering round,' said Nazarka, winking and jerking his shoulder and leg.

'Come, come!' said the old man incredulously.

'Really, Uncle! You must keep watch,' replied Nazarka with a laugh.

The other Cossacks began laughing.

The wag had not seen any vulture at all, but it had long been the custom of the young Cossacks in the cordon to tease and mislead Uncle Eroshka every time he came to them.

'Eh, you fool, always lying!' exclaimed Lukashka from the tower to Nazarka.

Nazarka was immediately silenced.

'It must be watched. I'll watch,' answered the old man to the great delight of all the Cossacks. 'But have you seen any boars?'

'Watching for boars, are you?' said the corporal, bending forward and scratching his back with both hands, very pleased at the chance of some distraction. 'It's abreks one has to hunt here and not boars! You've not heard anything, Uncle, have you?' he added, needlessly screwing up his eyes and showing his close-set white teeth.

'Abreks,' said the old man. 'No, I haven't. I say, have you any chikhir? Let me have a drink, there's a good man. I'm really quite done up. When the time comes I'll bring you some fresh meat, I really will. Give me a drink!' he added.

'Well, and are you going to watch?' inquired the corporal, as though he had not heard what the other said.

'I did mean to watch tonight,' replied Uncle Eroshka. 'Maybe, with God's help, I shall kill something for the holiday. Then you shall have a share, you shall indeed!'

'Uncle! Hallo, Uncle!' called out Lukashka sharply from above, attracting everybody's attention. All the Cossacks looked up at him. 'Just go to the upper water-course, there's a fine herd of boars there. I'm not inventing, really! The other day one of our Cossacks shot one there. I'm telling you the truth,' added he, readjusting the musket at his back and in a tone that showed he was not joking.

'Ah! Lukashka the Snatcher is here!' said the old man, looking up.

'Where has he been shooting?'

'Haven't you seen? I suppose you're too young!' said Lukashka. 'Close by the ditch,' he went on seriously with a shake of the head. 'We were just going along the ditch when all at once we heard something crackling, but my gun was in its case. Elias fired suddenly ... But I'll show you the place, it's not far. You just wait a bit. I know every one of their footpaths ... Daddy Mosev,' said he, turning resolutely and almost commandingly to the corporal, 'it's time to relieve guard!' and holding aloft his gun he began to descend from the watch-tower without waiting for the order.

'Come down!' said the corporal, after Lukashka had started, and glanced round. 'Is it your turn, Gurka? Then go ... True enough your Lukashka has become very skilful,' he went on, addressing the old man. 'He keeps going about just like you, he doesn't stay at home. The other day he killed a boar.'