

Chapter VII

The sun had already set and the shades of night were rapidly spreading from the edge of the wood. The Cossacks finished their task round the cordon and gathered in the hut for supper. Only the old man still stayed under the plane tree watching for the vulture and pulling the string tied to the falcon's leg, but though a vulture was really perching on the plane tree it declined to swoop down on the lure. Lukashka, singing one song after another, was leisurely placing nets among the very thickest brambles to trap pheasants. In spite of his tall stature and big hands every kind of work, both rough and delicate, prospered under Lukashka's fingers.

'Hallo, Luke!' came Nazarka's shrill, sharp voice calling him from the thicket close by. 'The Cossacks have gone in to supper.'

Nazarka, with a live pheasant under his arm, forced his way through the brambles and emerged on the footpath.

'Oh!' said Lukashka, breaking off in his song, 'where did you get that cock pheasant? I suppose it was in my trap?'

Nazarka was of the same age as Lukashka and had also only been at the front since the previous spring.

He was plain, thin and puny, with a shrill voice that rang in one's ears. They were neighbours and comrades. Lukashka was sitting on the grass crosslegged like a Tartar, adjusting his nets.

'I don't know whose it was--yours, I expect.'

'Was it beyond the pit by the plane tree? Then it is mine! I set the nets last night.'

Lukashka rose and examined the captured pheasant. After stroking the dark burnished head of the bird, which rolled its eyes and stretched out its neck in terror, Lukashka took the pheasant in his hands.

'We'll have it in a pilau tonight. You go and kill and pluck it.'

'And shall we eat it ourselves or give it to the corporal?'

'He has plenty!'

'I don't like killing them,' said Nazarka.

'Give it here!'

Lukashka drew a little knife from under his dagger and gave it a swift jerk. The bird fluttered, but before it could spread its wings the bleeding head bent and quivered.

'That's how one should do it!' said Lukashka, throwing down the pheasant. 'It will make a fat pilau.'

Nazarka shuddered as he looked at the bird.

'I say, Lukashka, that fiend will be sending us to the ambush again tonight,' he said, taking up the bird. (He was alluding to the corporal.) 'He has sent Fomushkin to get wine, and it ought to be his turn. He always puts it on us.'

Lukashka went whistling along the cordon.

'Take the string with you,' he shouted.

Nazirka obeyed.

'I'll give him a bit of my mind today, I really will,' continued Nazarka. 'Let's say we won't go; we're tired out and there's an end of it! No, really, you tell him, he'll listen to you. It's too bad!'

'Get along with you! What a thing to make a fuss about!' said Lukashka, evidently thinking of something else. 'What bosh! If he made us turn out of the village at night now, that would be annoying: there one can have some fun, but here what is there? It's all one whether we're in the cordon or in ambush. What a fellow you are!'

'And are you going to the village?'

'I'll go for the holidays.'

'Gurka says your Dunayka is carrying on with Fomushkin,' said Nazarka suddenly.

'Well, let her go to the devil,' said Lukashka, showing his regular white teeth, though he did not laugh. 'As if I couldn't find another!'

'Gurka says he went to her house. Her husband was out and there was Fomushkin sitting and eating pie. Gurka stopped awhile and then went away, and passing by the window he heard her say, "He's gone, the fiend.... Why don't you eat your pie, my own? You needn't go home for the night," she says. And Gurka under the window says to himself, "That's fine!"'

'You're making it up.'

'No, quite true, by Heaven!'

'Well, if she's found another let her go to the devil,' said Lukashka, after a pause. 'There's no lack of girls and I was sick of her anyway.'

'Well, see what a devil you are!' said Nazarka. 'You should make up to

the cornet's girl, Maryanka. Why doesn't she walk out with any one?'

Lukashka frowned. 'What of Maryanka? They're all alike,' said he.

'Well, you just try...'

'What do you think? Are girls so scarce in the village?'

And Lukashka recommenced whistling, and went along the cordon pulling leaves and branches from the bushes as he went. Suddenly, catching sight of a smooth sapling, he drew the knife from the handle of his dagger and cut it down. 'What a ramrod it will make,' he said, swinging the sapling till it whistled through the air.

The Cossacks were sitting round a low Tartar table on the earthen floor of the clay-plastered outer room of the hut, when the question of whose turn it was to lie in ambush was raised. 'Who is to go tonight?' shouted one of the Cossacks through the open door to the corporal in the next room.

'Who is to go?' the corporal shouted back. 'Uncle Burlak has been and Fomushkin too,' said he, not quite confidently. 'You two had better go, you and Nazarka,' he went on, addressing Lukashka. 'And Ergushov must go too; surely he has slept it off?'

'You don't sleep it off yourself so why should he?' said Nazarka in a

subdued voice.

The Cossacks laughed.

Ergushov was the Cossack who had been lying drunk and asleep near the hut. He had only that moment staggered into the room rubbing his eyes.

Lukashka had already risen and was getting his gun ready.

'Be quick and go! Finish your supper and go!' said the corporal; and without waiting for an expression of consent he shut the door, evidently not expecting the Cossack to obey. 'Of course,' thought he, 'if I hadn't been ordered to I wouldn't send anyone, but an officer might turn up at any moment. As it is, they say eight abreks have crossed over.'

'Well, I suppose I must go,' remarked Ergushov, 'it's the regulation. Can't be helped! The times are such. I say, we must go.'

Meanwhile Lukashka, holding a big piece of pheasant to his mouth with both hands and glancing now at Nazarka, now at Ergushov, seemed quite indifferent to what passed and only laughed at them both. Before the Cossacks were ready to go into ambush. Uncle Eroshka, who had been vainly waiting under the plane tree till night fell, entered the dark outer room.

'Well, lads,' his loud bass resounded through the low-roofed room drowning all the other voices, 'I'm going with you. You'll watch for Chechens and I for boars!'