

Chapter VIII

It was quite dark when Uncle Eroshka and the three Cossacks, in their cloaks and shouldering their guns, left the cordon and went towards the place on the Terek where they were to lie in ambush. Nazarka did not want to go at all, but Lukashka shouted at him and they soon started. After they had gone a few steps in silence the Cossacks turned aside from the ditch and went along a path almost hidden by reeds till they reached the river. On its bank lay a thick black log cast up by the water. The reeds around it had been recently beaten down.

'Shall we lie here?' asked Nazarka.

'Why not?' answered Lukashka. 'Sit down here and I'll be back in a minute. I'll only show Daddy where to go.'

'This is the best place; here we can see and not be seen,' said Ergushov, 'so it's here we'll lie. It's a first-rate place!'

Nazarka and Ergushov spread out their cloaks and settled down behind the log, while Lukashka went on with Uncle Eroshka.

'It's not far from here. Daddy,' said Lukashka, stepping softly in front of the old man; 'I'll show you where they've been--I'm the only one that knows. Daddy.'

'Show me! You're a fine fellow, a regular Snatcher!' replied the old man, also whispering.

Having gone a few steps Lukashka stopped, stooped down over a puddle, and whistled. 'That's where they come to drink, d'you see?' He spoke in a scarcely audible voice, pointing to fresh hoof-prints.

'Christ bless you,' answered the old man. 'The boar will be in the hollow beyond the ditch,' he added. 'Til watch, and you can go.'

Lukashka pulled his cloak up higher and walked back alone, throwing swift glances now to the left at the wall of reeds, now to the Terek rushing by below the bank. 'I daresay he's watching or creeping along somewhere,' thought he of a possible Chechen hillsman. Suddenly a loud rustling and a splash in the water made him start and seize his musket. From under the bank a boar leapt up--his dark outline showing for a moment against the glassy surface of the water and then disappearing among the reeds. Lukashka pulled out his gun and aimed, but before he could fire the boar had disappeared in the thicket. Lukashka spat with vexation and went on. On approaching the ambushade he halted again and whistled softly. His whistle was answered and he stepped up to his comrades.

Nazarka, all curled up, was already asleep. Ergushov sat with his legs crossed and moved slightly to make room for Lukashka.

'How jolly it is to sit here! It's really a good place,' said he. 'Did you take him there?'

'Showed him where,' answered Lukashka, spreading out his cloak. 'But what a big boar I roused just now close to the water! I expect it was the very one! You must have heard the crash?'

'I did hear a beast crashing through. I knew at once it was a beast. I thought to myself: "Lukashka has roused a beast,"' Ergushov said, wrapping himself up in his cloak. 'Now I'll go to sleep,' he added.

'Wake me when the cocks crow. We must have discipline. I'll lie down and have a nap, and then you will have a nap and I'll watch--that's the way.'

'Luckily I don't want to sleep,' answered Lukashka.

The night was dark, warm, and still. Only on one side of the sky the stars were shining, the other and greater part was overcast by one huge cloud stretching from the mountaintops. The black cloud, blending in the absence of any wind with the mountains, moved slowly onwards, its curved edges sharply dened against the deep starry sky. Only in front of him could the Cossack discern the Terek and the distance beyond. Behind and on both sides he was surrounded by a wall of reeds. Occasionally the reeds would sway and rustle against one another apparently without cause. Seen from down below, against the clear part

of the sky, their waving tufts looked like the feathery branches of trees. Close in front at his very feet was the bank, and at its base the rushing torrent. A little farther on was the moving mass of glassy brown water which eddied rhythmically along the bank and round the shallows. Farther still, water, banks, and cloud all merged together in impenetrable gloom. Along the surface of the water floated black shadows, in which the experienced eyes of the Cossack detected trees carried down by the current. Only very rarely sheet-lightning, mirrored in the water as in a black glass, disclosed the sloping bank opposite. The rhythmic sounds of night--the rustling of the reeds, the snoring of the Cossacks, the hum of mosquitoes, and the rushing water, were every now and then broken by a shot fired in the distance, or by the gurgling of water when a piece of bank slipped down, the splash of a big fish, or the crashing of an animal breaking through the thick undergrowth in the wood. Once an owl flew past along the Terek, flapping one wing against the other rhythmically at every second beat. Just above the Cossack's head it turned towards the wood and then, striking its wings no longer after every other flap but at every flap, it flew to an old plane tree where it rustled about for a long time before settling down among the branches. At every one of these unexpected sounds the watching Cossack listened intently, straining his hearing, and screwing up his eyes while he deliberately felt for his musket.

The greater part of the night was past. The black cloud that had moved westward revealed the clear starry sky from under its torn edge, and the golden upturned crescent of the moon shone above the mountains with

a reddish light. The cold began to be penetrating. Nazarka awoke, spoke a little, and fell asleep again. Lukashka feeling bored got up, drew the knife from his dagger-handle and began to fashion his stick into a ramrod. His head was full of the Chechens who lived over there in the mountains, and of how their brave lads came across and were not afraid of the Cossacks, and might even now be crossing the river at some other spot. He thrust himself out of his hiding-place and looked along the river but could see nothing. And as he continued looking out at intervals upon the river and at the opposite bank, now dimly distinguishable from the water in the faint moonlight, he no longer thought about the Chechens but only of when it would be time to wake his comrades, and of going home to the village. In the village he imagined Dunayka, his 'little soul', as the Cossacks call a man's mistress, and thought of her with vexation. Silvery mists, a sign of coming morning, glittered white above the water, and not far from him young eagles were whistling and flapping their wings. At last the crowing of a cock reached him from the distant village, followed by the long-sustained note of another, which was again answered by yet other voices.

'Time to wake them,' thought Lukashka, who had finished his ramrod and felt his eyes growing heavy. Turning to his comrades he managed to make out which pair of legs belonged to whom, when it suddenly seemed to him that he heard something splash on the other side of the Terek. He turned again towards the horizon beyond the hills, where day was breaking under the upturned crescent, glanced at the outline of the

opposite bank, at the Terek, and at the now distinctly visible driftwood upon it. For one instant it seemed to him that he was moving and that the Terek with the drifting wood remained stationary. Again he peered out. One large black log with a branch particularly attracted his attention. The tree was floating in a strange way right down the middle of the stream, neither rocking nor whirling. It even appeared not to be floating altogether with the current, but to be crossing it in the direction of the shallows. Lukashka stretching out his neck watched it intently. The tree floated to the shallows, stopped, and shifted in a peculiar manner. Lukashka thought he saw an arm stretched out from beneath the tree. 'Supposing I killed an abrek all by myself!' he thought, and seized his gun with a swift, unhurried movement, putting up his gun-rest, placing the gun upon it, and holding it noiselessly in position. Cocking the trigger, with bated breath he took aim, still peering out intently. 'I won't wake them,' he thought. But his heart began beating so fast that he remained motionless, listening. Suddenly the trunk gave a plunge and again began to float across the stream towards our bank. 'Only not to miss ...' thought he, and now by the faint light of the moon he caught a glimpse of a Tartar's head in front of the floating wood. He aimed straight at the head which appeared to be quite near--just at the end of his rifle's barrel. He glanced cross. 'Right enough it is an abrek!' he thought joyfully, and suddenly rising to his knees he again took aim. Having found the sight, barely visible at the end of the long gun, he said: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son,' in the Cossack way learnt in his childhood, and pulled the trigger. A flash of lightning lit up for an instant the

reeds and the water, and the sharp, abrupt report of the shot was carried across the river, changing into a prolonged roll somewhere in the far distance. The piece of driftwood now floated not across, but with the current, rocking and whirling.

'Stop, I say!' exclaimed Ergushov, seizing his musket and raising himself behind the log near which he was lying.

'Shut up, you devil!' whispered Lukashka, grinding his teeth. 'abreks!'

'Whom have you shot?' asked Nazarka. 'Who was it, Lukashka?'

Lukashka did not answer. He was reloading his gun and watching the floating wood. A little way off it stopped on a sand-bank, and from behind it something large that rocked in the water came into view.

'What did you shoot? Why don't you speak?' insisted the Cossacks.

'Abreks, I tell you!' said Lukashka.

'Don't humbug! Did the gun go off? ...'

'I've killed an abrek, that's what I fired at,' muttered Lukashka in a voice choked by emotion, as he jumped to his feet. 'A man was swimming...' he said, pointing to the sandbank. 'I killed him. Just look there.'

'Have done with your humbugging!' said Ergushov again, rubbing his eyes.

'Have done with what? Look there,' said Lukashka, seizing him by the shoulders and pulling him with such force that Ergushov groaned.

He looked in the direction in which Lukashka pointed, and discerning a body immediately changed his tone.

'O Lord! But I say, more will come! I tell you the truth,' said he softly, and began examining his musket. 'That was a scout swimming across: either the others are here already or are not far off on the other side--I tell you for sure!' Lukashka was unfastening his belt and taking off his Circassian coat.

'What are you up to, you idiot?' exclaimed Ergushov. 'Only show yourself and you've lost all for nothing, I tell you true! If you've killed him he won't escape. Let me have a little powder for my musket-pan--you have some? Nazarka, you go back to the cordon and look alive; but don't go along the bank or you'll be killed--I tell you true.'

'Catch me going alone! Go yourself!' said Nazarka angrily.

Having taken off his coat, Lukashka went down to the bank.

'Don't go in, I tell you!' said Ergushov, putting some powder on the pan. 'Look, he's not moving. I can see. It's nearly morning; wait till they come from the cordon. You go, Nazarka. You're afraid! Don't be afraid, I tell you.'

'Luke, I say, Lukashka! Tell us how you did it!' said Nazarka.

Lukashka changed his mind about going into the water just then. 'Go quick to the cordon and I will watch. Tell the Cossacks to send out the patrol. If the ABREKS are on this side they must be caught,' said he.

'That's what I say. They'll get off,' said Ergushov, rising. 'True, they must be caught!'

Ergushov and Nazarka rose and, crossing themselves, started off for the cordon--not along the riverbank but breaking their way through the brambles to reach a path in the wood.

'Now mind, Lukashka--they may cut you down here, so you'd best keep a sharp look-out, I tell you!'

'Go along; I know,' muttered Lukashka; and having examined his gun again he sat down behind the log.

He remained alone and sat gazing at the shallows and listening for the Cossacks; but it was some distance to the cordon and he was tormented

by impatience. He kept thinking that the other ABREKS who were with the one he had killed would escape. He was vexed with the ABREKS who were going to escape just as he had been with the boar that had escaped the evening before. He glanced round and at the opposite bank, expecting every moment to see a man, and having arranged his gun-rest he was ready to fire. The idea that he might himself be killed never entered his head.