

Chapter X

On the third day after the events above described, two companies of a Caucasian infantry regiment arrived at the Cossack village of Novomlinsk. The horses had been unharnessed and the companies' wagons were standing in the square. The cooks had dug a pit, and with logs gathered from various yards (where they had not been sufficiently securely stored) were now cooking the food; the pay-sergeants were settling accounts with the soldiers. The Service Corps men were driving piles in the ground to which to tie the horses, and the quartermasters were going about the streets just as if they were at home, showing officers and men to their quarters. Here were green ammunition boxes in a line, the company's carts, horses, and cauldrons in which buckwheat porridge was being cooked. Here were the captain and the lieutenant and the sergeant-major, Onisim Mikhaylovich, and all this was in the Cossack village where it was reported that the companies were ordered to take up their quarters: therefore they were at home here. But why they were stationed there, who the Cossacks were, and whether they wanted the troops to be there, and whether they were Old Believers or not--was all quite immaterial. Having received their pay and been dismissed, tired out and covered with dust, the soldiers noisily and in disorder, like a swarm of bees about to settle, spread over the squares and streets; quite regardless of the Cossacks' ill will, chattering merrily and with their muskets clinking, by twos and threes they entered the huts and hung up their accoutrements, unpacked their bags,

and bantered the women. At their favourite spot, round the porridge-cauldrons, a large group of soldiers assembled and with little pipes between their teeth they gazed, now at the smoke which rose into the hot sky, becoming visible when it thickened into white clouds as it rose, and now at the camp fires which were quivering in the pure air like molten glass, and bantered and made fun of the Cossack men and women because they do not live at all like Russians. In all the yards one could see soldiers and hear their laughter and the exasperated and shrill cries of Cossack women defending their houses and refusing to give the soldiers water or cooking utensils. Little boys and girls, clinging to their mothers and to each other, followed all the movements of the troopers (never before seen by them) with frightened curiosity, or ran after them at a respectful distance. The old Cossacks came out silently and dismally and sat on the earthen embankments of their huts, and watched the soldiers' activity with an air of leaving it all to the will of God without understanding what would come of it.

Olenin, who had joined the Caucasian Army as a cadet three months before, was quartered in one of the best houses in the village, the house of the cornet, Elias Vasilich--that is to say at Granny Ulitka's.

'Goodness knows what it will be like, Dmitri Andreich,' said the panting Vanyusha to Olenin, who, dressed in a Circassian coat and mounted on a Kabarda horse which he had bought in Groznoe, was after a five-hours' march gaily entering the yard of the quarters assigned to him.

'Why, what's the matter?' he asked, caressing his horse and looking merrily at the perspiring, dishevelled, and worried Vanyusha, who had arrived with the baggage wagons and was unpacking.

Olenin looked quite a different man. In place of his clean-shaven lips and chin he had a youthful moustache and a small beard. Instead of a sallow complexion, the result of nights turned into day, his cheeks, his forehead, and the skin behind his ears were now red with healthy sunburn. In place of a clean new black suit he wore a dirty white Circassian coat with a deeply pleated skirt, and he bore arms. Instead of a freshly starched collar, his neck was tightly clasped by the red band of his silk BESHMET. He wore Circassian dress but did not wear it well, and anyone would have known him for a Russian and not a Tartar brave. It was the thing--but not the real thing. But for all that, his whole person breathed health, joy, and satisfaction.

'Yes, it seems funny to you,' said Vanyusha, 'but just try to talk to these people yourself: they set themselves against one and there's an end of it. You can't get as much as a word out of them.' Vanyusha angrily threw down a pail on the threshold. 'Somehow they don't seem like Russians.'

'You should speak to the Chief of the Village!'

'But I don't know where he lives,' said Vanyusha in an offended tone.

'Who has upset you so?' asked Olenin, looking round.

'The devil only knows. Faugh! There is no real master here. They say he has gone to some kind of KRIGA, and the old woman is a real devil. God preserve us!' answered Vanyusha, putting his hands to his head. 'How we shall live here I don't know. They are worse than Tartars, I do declare--though they consider themselves Christians! A Tartar is bad enough, but all the same he is more noble. Gone to the KRIGA indeed! What this KRIGA they have invented is, I don't know!' concluded Vanyusha, and turned aside.

'It's not as it is in the serfs' quarters at home, eh?' chaffed Olenin without dismounting.

'Please sir, may I have your horse?' said Vanyusha, evidently perplexed by this new order of things but resigning himself to his fate.

'So a Tartar is more noble, eh, Vanyusha?' repeated Olenin, dismounting and slapping the saddle.

'Yes, you're laughing! You think it funny,' muttered Vanyusha angrily.

'Come, don't be angry, Vanyusha,' replied Olenin, still smiling. 'Wait a minute, I'll go and speak to the people of the house; you'll see I shall arrange everything. You don't know what a jolly life we shall

have here. Only don't get upset.'

Vanyusha did not answer. Screwing up his eyes he looked contemptuously after his master, and shook his head. Vanyusha regarded Olenin as only his master, and Olenin regarded Vanyusha as only his servant; and they would both have been much surprised if anyone had told them that they were friends, as they really were without knowing it themselves.

Vanyusha had been taken into his proprietor's house when he was only eleven and when Olenin was the same age. When Olenin was fifteen he gave Vanyusha lessons for a time and taught him to read French, of which the latter was inordinately proud; and when in specially good spirits he still let off French words, always laughing stupidly when he did so.

Olenin ran up the steps of the porch and pushed open the door of the hut. Maryanka, wearing nothing but a pink smock, as all Cossack women do in the house, jumped away from the door, frightened, and pressing herself against the wall covered the lower part of her face with the broad sleeve of her Tartar smock. Having opened the door wider, Olenin in the semi-darkness of the passage saw the whole tall, shapely figure of the young Cossack girl. With the quick and eager curiosity of youth he involuntarily noticed the firm maidenly form revealed by the fine print smock, and the beautiful black eyes fixed on him with childlike terror and wild curiosity. 'This is SHE,' thought Olenin. 'But there will be many others like her' came at once into his head, and he opened the inner door. Old Granny Ulitka, also dressed only in a smock, was

stooping with her back turned to him, sweeping the floor.

'Good-day to you. Mother! I've come about my lodgings,' he began.

The Cossack woman, without unbending, turned her severe but still handsome face towards him.

'What have you come here for? Want to mock at us, eh? I'll teach you to mock; may the black plague seize you!' she shouted, looking askance from under her frowning brow at the new-comer.

Olenin had at first imagined that the way-worn, gallant Caucasian Army (of which he was a member) would be everywhere received joyfully, and especially by the Cossacks, our comrades in the war; and he therefore felt perplexed by this reception. Without losing presence of mind however he tried to explain that he meant to pay for his lodgings, but the old woman would not give him a hearing.

'What have you come for? Who wants a pest like you, with your scraped face? You just wait a bit; when the master returns he'll show you your place. I don't want your dirty money! A likely thing--just as if we had never seen any! You'll stink the house out with your beastly tobacco and want to put it right with money! Think we've never seen a pest! May you be shot in your bowels and your heart!' shrieked the old woman in a piercing voice, interrupting Olenin.

'It seems Vanyusha was right!' thought Olenin. "A Tartar would be nobler", and followed by Granny Ulitka's abuse he went out of the hut. As he was leaving, Maryanka, still wearing only her pink smock, but with her forehead covered down to her eyes by a white kerchief, suddenly slipped out from the passage past him. Pattering rapidly down the steps with her bare feet she ran from the porch, stopped, and looking round hastily with laughing eyes at the young man, vanished round the corner of the hut.

Her firm youthful step, the untamed look of the eyes glistening from under the white kerchief, and the firm stately build of the young beauty, struck Olenin even more powerfully than before. 'Yes, it must be SHE,' he thought, and troubling his head still less about the lodgings, he kept looking round at Maryanka as he approached Vanyusha.

'There you see, the girl too is quite savage, just like a wild filly!' said Vanyusha, who though still busy with the luggage wagon had now cheered up a bit. 'LA FAME!' he added in a loud triumphant voice and burst out laughing.