

Chapter XI

Towards evening the master of the house returned from his fishing, and having learnt that the cadet would pay for the lodging, pacified the old woman and satisfied Vanyusha's demands.

Everything was arranged in the new quarters. Their hosts moved into the winter hut and let their summer hut to the cadet for three rubles a month. Olenin had something to eat and went to sleep. Towards evening he woke up, washed and made himself tidy, dined, and having lit a cigarette sat down by the window that looked onto the street. It was cooler. The slanting shadow of the hut with its ornamental gables fell across the dusty road and even bent upwards at the base of the wall of the house opposite. The steep reed-thatched roof of that house shone in the rays of the setting sun. The air grew fresher. Everything was peaceful in the village. The soldiers had settled down and become quiet. The herds had not yet been driven home and the people had not returned from their work.

Olenin's lodging was situated almost at the end of the village. At rare intervals, from somewhere far beyond the Terek in those parts whence Olenin had just come (the Chechen or the Kumytsk plain), came muffled sounds of firing. Olenin was feeling very well contented after three months of bivouac life. His newly washed face was fresh and his powerful body clean (an unaccustomed sensation after the campaign) and

in all his rested limbs he was conscious of a feeling of tranquillity and strength. His mind, too, felt fresh and clear. He thought of the campaign and of past dangers. He remembered that he had faced them no worse than other men, and that he was accepted as a comrade among valiant Caucasians. His Moscow recollections were left behind Heaven knows how far! The old life was wiped out and a quite new life had begun in which there were as yet no mistakes. Here as a new man among new men he could gain a new and good reputation. He was conscious of a youthful and unreasoning joy of life. Looking now out of the window at the boys spinning their tops in the shadow of the house, now round his neat new lodging, he thought how pleasantly he would settle down to this new Cossack village life. Now and then he glanced at the mountains and the blue sky, and an appreciation of the solemn grandeur of nature mingled with his reminiscences and dreams. His new life had begun, not as he imagined it would when he left Moscow, but unexpectedly well.

'The mountains, the mountains, the mountains!' they permeated all his thoughts and feelings.

'He's kissed his dog and licked the jug! ... Daddy Eroshka has kissed his dog!' suddenly the little Cossacks who had been spinning their tops under the window shouted, looking towards the side street. 'He's drunk his bitch, and his dagger!' shouted the boys, crowding together and stepping backwards.

These shouts were addressed to Daddy Eroshka, who with his gun on his shoulder and some pheasants hanging at his girdle was returning from

his shooting expedition.

'I have done wrong, lads, I have!' he said, vigorously swinging his arms and looking up at the windows on both sides of the street. 'I have drunk the bitch; it was wrong,' he repeated, evidently vexed but pretending not to care.

Olenin was surprised by the boys' behavior towards the old hunter, but was still more struck by the expressive, intelligent face and the powerful build of the man whom they called Daddy Eroshka.

'Here Daddy, here Cossack!' he called. 'Come here!'

The old man looked into the window and stopped.

'Good evening, good man,' he said, lifting his little cap off his cropped head.

'Good evening, good man,' replied Olenin. 'What is it the youngsters are shouting at you?'

Daddy Eroshka came up to the window. 'Why, they're teasing the old man. No matter, I like it. Let them joke about their old daddy,' he said with those firm musical intonations with which old and venerable people speak. 'Are you an army commander?' he added.

'No, I am a cadet. But where did you kill those pheasants?' asked Olenin.

'I dispatched these three hens in the forest,' answered the old man, turning his broad back towards the window to show the hen pheasants which were hanging with their heads tucked into his belt and staining his coat with blood. 'Haven't you seen any?' he asked. 'Take a brace if you like! Here you are,' and he handed two of the pheasants in at the window. 'Are you a sportsman yourself?' he asked.

'I am. During the campaign I killed four myself.'

'Four? What a lot!' said the old man sarcastically. 'And are you a drinker? Do you drink CHIKHIR?'

'Why not? I like a drink.'

'Ah, I see you are a trump! We shall be KUNAKS, you and I,' said Daddy Eroshka.

'Step in,' said Olenin. 'We'll have a drop of CHIKHIR.'

'I might as well,' said the old man, 'but take the pheasants.' The old man's face showed that he liked the cadet. He had seen at once that he could get free drinks from him, and that therefore it would be all right to give him a brace of pheasants.

Soon Daddy Eroshka's figure appeared in the doorway of the hut, and it was only then that Olenin became fully conscious of the enormous size and sturdy build of this man, whose red-brown face with its perfectly white broad beard was all furrowed by deep lines produced by age and toil. For an old man, the muscles of his legs, arms, and shoulders were quite exceptionally large and prominent. There were deep scars on his head under the short-cropped hair. His thick sinewy neck was covered with deep intersecting folds like a bull's. His horny hands were bruised and scratched. He stepped lightly and easily over the threshold, unslung his gun and placed it in a corner, and casting a rapid glance round the room noted the value of the goods and chattels deposited in the hut, and with out-turned toes stepped softly, in his sandals of raw hide, into the middle of the room. He brought with him a penetrating but not unpleasant smell of CHIKHIR wine, vodka, gunpowder, and congealed blood.

Daddy Eroshka bowed down before the icons, smoothed his beard, and approaching Olenin held out his thick brown hand. 'Koshkildy,' said he; That is Tartar for "Good-day"--"Peace be unto you," it means in their tongue.'

'Koshkildy, I know,' answered Olenin, shaking hands.

'Eh, but you don't, you won't know the right order! Fool!' said Daddy Eroshka, shaking his head reproachfully. 'If anyone says "Koshkildy" to

you, you must say "Allah rasi bo sun," that is, "God save you." That's the way, my dear fellow, and not "Koshkildy." But I'll teach you all about it. We had a fellow here, Elias Mosevich, one of your Russians, he and I were kunaks. He was a trump, a drunkard, a thief, a sportsman--and what a sportsman! I taught him everything.'

'And what will you teach me?' asked Olenin, who was becoming more and more interested in the old man.

'I'll take you hunting and teach you to fish. I'll show you Chechens and find a girl for you, if you like--even that! That's the sort I am! I'm a wag!--and the old man laughed. 'I'll sit down. I'm tired. Karga?' he added inquiringly.

'And what does "Karga" mean?' asked Olenin.

'Why, that means "All right" in Georgian. But I say it just so. It is a way I have, it's my favourite word. Karga, Karga. I say it just so; in fun I mean. Well, lad, won't you order the chikhir? You've got an orderly, haven't you? Hey, Ivan!' shouted the old man. 'All your soldiers are Ivans. Is yours Ivan?'

'True enough, his name is Ivan--Vanyusha. Here Vanyusha! Please get some chikhir from our landlady and bring it here.'

'Ivan or Vanyusha, that's all one. Why are all your soldiers Ivans?'

Ivan, old fellow,' said the old man, 'you tell them to give you some from the barrel they have begun. They have the best chikhir in the village. But don't give more than thirty kopeks for the quart, mind, because that witch would be only too glad.... Our people are anathema people; stupid people,' Daddy Eroshka continued in a confidential tone after Vanyusha had gone out. 'They do not look upon you as on men, you are worse than a Tartar in their eyes. "Worldly Russians" they say. But as for me, though you are a soldier you are still a man, and have a soul in you. Isn't that right? Elias Mosevich was a soldier, yet what a treasure of a man he was! Isn't that so, my dear fellow? That's why our people don't like me; but I don't care! I'm a merry fellow, and I like everybody. I'm Eroshka; yes, my dear fellow.'

And the old Cossack patted the young man affectionately on the shoulder.