

Chapter XIII

Meanwhile the tattoo had sounded in the village square. The people had returned from their work. The herd lowed as in clouds of golden dust it crowded at the village gate. The girls and the women hurried through the streets and yards, turning in their cattle. The sun had quite hidden itself behind the distant snowy peaks. One pale bluish shadow spread over land and sky. Above the darkened gardens stars just discernible were kindling, and the sounds were gradually hushed in the village. The cattle having been attended to and left for the night, the women came out and gathered at the corners of the streets and, cracking sunflower seeds with their teeth, settled down on the earthen embankments of the houses. Later on Maryanka, having finished milking the buffalo and the other two cows, also joined one of these groups.

The group consisted of several women and girls and one old Cossack man.

They were talking about the abrek who had been killed.

The Cossack was narrating and the women questioning him.

'I expect he'll get a handsome reward,' said one of the women.

'Of course. It's said that they'll send him a cross.'

'Mosev did try to wrong him. Took the gun away from him, but the authorities at Kizlyar heard of it.'

'A mean creature that Mosev is!'

'They say Lukashka has come home,' remarked one of the girls.

'He and Nazarka are merry-making at Yamka's.' (Yamka was an unmarried, disreputable Cossack woman who kept an illicit pot-house.) 'I heard say they had drunk half a pailful.'

'What luck that Snatcher has,' somebody remarked. 'A real snatcher. But there's no denying he's a fine lad, smart enough for anything, a right-minded lad! His father was just such another. Daddy Kiryak was: he takes after his father. When he was killed the whole village howled. Look, there they are,' added the speaker, pointing to the Cossacks who were coming down the street towards them.

'And Ergushov has managed to come along with them too! The drunkard!'

Lukashka, Nazarka, and Ergushov, having emptied half a pail of vodka, were coming towards the girls. The faces of all three, but especially that of the old Cossack, were redder than usual. Ergushov was reeling and kept laughing and nudging Nazarka in the ribs.

'Why are you not singing?' he shouted to the girls. 'Sing to our

merry-making, I tell you!

They were welcomed with the words, 'Had a good day? Had a good day?'

'Why sing? It's not a holiday,' said one of the women. 'You're tight, so you go and sing.'

Ergushov roared with laughter and nudged Nazarka. 'You'd better sing. And I'll begin too. I'm clever, I tell you.'

'Are you asleep, fair ones?' said Nazarka. 'We've come from the cordon to drink your health. We've already drunk Lukashka's health.'

Lukashka, when he reached the group, slowly raised his cap and stopped in front of the girls. His broad cheekbones and neck were red. He stood and spoke softly and sedately, but in his tranquillity and sedateness there was more of animation and strength than in all Nazarka's loquacity and bustle. He reminded one of a playful colt that with a snort and a flourish of its tail suddenly stops short and stands as though nailed to the ground with all four feet. Lukashka stood quietly in front of the girls, his eyes laughed, and he spoke but little as he glanced now at his drunken companions and now at the girls. When Maryanka joined the group he raised his cap with a firm deliberate movement, moved out of her way and then stepped in front of her with one foot a little forward and with his thumbs in his belt, fingering his dagger. Maryanka answered his greeting with a leisurely bow of her

head, settled down on the earth-bank, and took some seeds out of the bosom of her smock. Lukashka, keeping his eyes fixed on Maryanka, slowly cracked seeds and spat out the shells. All were quiet when Maryanka joined the group.

'Have you come for long?' asked a woman, breaking the silence.

'Till to-morrow morning,' quietly replied Lukashka.

'Well, God grant you get something good,' said the Cossack; 'I'm glad of it, as I've just been saying.'

'And I say so too,' put in the tipsy Ergushov, laughing. 'What a lot of visitors have come,' he added, pointing to a soldier who was passing by. 'The soldiers' vodka is good--I like it.'

'They've sent three of the devils to us,' said one of the women.

'Grandad went to the village Elders, but they say nothing can be done.'

'Ah, ha! Have you met with trouble?' said Ergushov.

'I expect they have smoked you out with their tobacco?' asked another woman. 'Smoke as much as you like in the yard, I say, but we won't allow it inside the hut. Not if the Elder himself comes, I won't allow it. Besides, they may rob you. He's not quartered any of them on himself, no fear, that devil's son of an Elder.'

'You don't like it?' Ergushov began again.

'And I've also heard say that the girls will have to make the soldiers' beds and offer them chikhir and honey,' said Nazarka, putting one foot forward and tilting his cap like Lukashka.

Ergushov burst into a roar of laughter, and seizing the girl nearest to him, he embraced her. 'I tell you true.'

'Now then, you black pitch!' squealed the girl, 'I'll tell your old woman.'

'Tell her,' shouted he. 'That's quite right what Nazarka says; a circular has been sent round. He can read, you know. Quite true!' And he began embracing the next girl.

'What are you up to, you beast?' squealed the rosy, round-faced Ustenka, laughing and lifting her arm to hit him.

The Cossack stepped aside and nearly fell.

'There, they say girls have no strength, and you nearly killed me.'

'Get away, you black pitch, what devil has brought you from the cordon?' said Ustenka, and turning away from him she again burst out

laughing. 'You were asleep and missed the abrek, didn't you? Suppose he had done for you it would have been all the better.'

'You'd have howled, I expect,' said Nazarka, laughing.

'Howled! A likely thing.'

'Just look, she doesn't care. She'd howl, Nazarka, eh? Would she?' said Ergushov.

Lukishka all this time had stood silently looking at Maryanka. His gaze evidently confused the girl.

'Well, Maryanka! I hear they've quartered one of the chiefs on you?' he said, drawing nearer.

Maryanka, as was her wont, waited before she replied, and slowly raising her eyes looked at the Cossack. Lukashka's eyes were laughing as if something special, apart from what was said, was taking place between himself and the girl.

'Yes, it's all right for them as they have two huts,' replied an old woman on Maryanka's behalf, 'but at Fomushkin's now they also have one of the chiefs quartered on them and they say one whole corner is packed full with his things, and the family have no room left. Was such a thing ever heard of as that they should turn a whole horde loose in the

village?' she said. 'And what the plague are they going to do here?'

'I've heard say they'll build a bridge across the Terek,' said one of the girls.

'And I've been told that they will dig a pit to put the girls in because they don't love the lads,' said Nazarka, approaching Ustenka; and he again made a whimsical gesture which set everybody laughing, and Ergushov, passing by Maryanka, who was next in turn, began to embrace an old woman.

'Why don't you hug Maryanka? You should do it to each in turn,' said Nazarka.

'No, my old one is sweeter,' shouted the Cossack, kissing the struggling old woman.

'You'll throttle me,' she screamed, laughing.

The tramp of regular footsteps at the other end of the street interrupted their laughter. Three soldiers in their cloaks, with their muskets on their shoulders, were marching in step to relieve guard by the ammunition wagon.

The corporal, an old cavalry man, looked angrily at the Cossacks and led his men straight along the road where Lukashka and Nazarka were

standing, so that they should have to get out of the way. Nazarka moved, but Lukashka only screwed up his eyes and turned his broad back without moving from his place.

'People are standing here, so you go round,' he muttered, half turning his head and tossing it contemptuously in the direction of the soldiers.

The soldiers passed by in silence, keeping step regularly along the dusty road.

Maryanka began laughing and all the other girls chimed in.

'What swells!' said Nazarka, 'Just like long-skirted choristers,' and he walked a few steps down the road imitating the soldiers.

Again everyone broke into peals of laughter.

Lukashka came slowly up to Maryanka.

'And where have you put up the chief?' he asked.

Maryanka thought for a moment.

'We've let him have the new hut,' she said.

'And is he old or young,' asked Lukashka, sitting down beside her.

'Do you think I've asked?' answered the girl. 'I went to get him some chikhir and saw him sitting at the window with Daddy Eroshka. Red-headed he seemed. They've brought a whole cartload of things.'

And she dropped her eyes.

'Oh, how glad I am that I got leave from the cordon!' said Lukashka, moving closer to the girl and looking straight in her eyes all the time.

'And have you come for long?' asked Maryanka, smiling slightly.

'Till the morning. Give me some sunflower seeds,' he said, holding out his hand.

Maryanka now smiled outright and unfastened the neckband of her smock.

'Don't take them all,' she said.

'Really I felt so dull all the time without you, I swear I did,' he said in a calm, restrained whisper, helping himself to some seeds out of the bosom of the girl's smock, and stooping still closer over her he continued with laughing eyes to talk to her in low tones.

'I won't come, I tell you,' Maryanka suddenly said aloud, leaning away from him.

'No really ... what I wanted to say to you, ...' whispered Lukashka.

'By the Heavens! Do come!'

Maryanka shook her head, but did so with a smile.

'Nursey Maryanka! Hallo Nursey! Mammy is calling! Supper time!' shouted Maryanka's little brother, running towards the group.

'I'm coming,' replied the girl. 'Go, my dear, go alone--I'll come in a minute.'

Lukashka rose and raised his cap.

'I expect I had better go home too, that will be best,' he said, trying to appear unconcerned but hardly able to repress a smile, and he disappeared behind the corner of the house.

Meanwhile night had entirely enveloped the village. Bright stars were scattered over the dark sky. The streets became dark and empty. Nazarka remained with the women on the earth-bank and their laughter was still heard, but Lukashka, having slowly moved away from the girls, crouched down like a cat and then suddenly started running lightly, holding his dagger to steady it: not homeward, however, but towards the cornet's house. Having passed two streets he turned into a lane and lifting the skirt of his coat sat down on the ground in the shadow of a fence. 'A

regular cornet's daughter!' he thought about Maryanka. 'Won't even have a lark--the devil! But just wait a bit.'

The approaching footsteps of a woman attracted his attention. He began listening, and laughed all by himself. Maryanka with bowed head, striking the pales of the fences with a switch, was walking with rapid regular strides straight towards him. Lukashka rose. Maryanka started and stopped.

'What an accursed devil! You frightened me! So you have not gone home?' she said, and laughed aloud.

Lukashka put one arm round her and with the other hand raised her face. 'What I wanted to tell you, by Heaven!' his voice trembled and broke.

'What are you talking of, at night time!' answered Maryanka. 'Mother is waiting for me, and you'd better go to your sweetheart.'

And freeing herself from his arms she ran away a few steps. When she had reached the wattle fence of her home she stopped and turned to the Cossack who was running beside her and still trying to persuade her to stay a while with him.

'Well, what do you want to say, midnight-gadabout?' and she again began laughing.

'Don't laugh at me, Maryanka! By the Heaven! Well, what if I have a sweetheart? May the devil take her! Only say the word and now I'll love you--I'll do anything you wish. Here they are!' and he jingled the money in his pocket. 'Now we can live splendidly. Others have pleasures, and I? I get no pleasure from you, Maryanka dear!'

The girl did not answer. She stood before him breaking her switch into little bits with a rapid movement of her fingers.

Lukashka suddenly clenched his teeth and fists.

'And why keep waiting and waiting? Don't I love you, darling? You can do what you like with me,' said he suddenly, frowning angrily and seizing both her hands.

The calm expression of Maryanka's face and voice did not change.

'Don't bluster, Lukashka, but listen to me,' she answered, not pulling away her hands but holding the Cossack at arm's length. 'It's true I am a girl, but you listen to me! It does not depend on me, but if you love me I'll tell you this. Let go my hands, I'll tell you without.--I'll marry you, but you'll never get any nonsense from me,' said Maryanka without turning her face.

'What, you'll marry me? Marriage does not depend on us. Love me yourself, Maryanka dear,' said Lukashka, from sullen and furious

becoming again gentle, submissive, and tender, and smiling as he looked closely into her eyes.

Maryanka clung to him and kissed him firmly on the lips.

'Brother dear!' she whispered, pressing him convulsively to her. Then, suddenly tearing herself away, she ran into the gate of her house without looking round.

In spite of the Cossack's entreaties to wait another minute to hear what he had to say, Maryanka did not stop.

'Go,' she cried, 'you'll be seen! I do believe that devil, our lodger, is walking about the yard.'

'Cornet's daughter,' thought Lukashka. 'She will marry me. Marriage is all very well, but you just love me!'

He found Nazarka at Yamka's house, and after having a spree with him went to Dunayka's house, where, in spite of her not being faithful to him, he spent the night.