

Chapter XIV

It was quite true that Olenin had been walking about the yard when Maryanka entered the gate, and had heard her say, 'That devil, our lodger, is walking about.' He had spent that evening with Daddy Eroshka in the porch of his new lodging. He had had a table, a samovar, wine, and a candle brought out, and over a cup of tea and a cigar he listened to the tales the old man told seated on the threshold at his feet. Though the air was still, the candle dripped and flickered: now lighting up the post of the porch, now the table and crockery, now the cropped white head of the old man. Moths circled round the flame and, shedding the dust of their wings, fluttered on the table and in the glasses, flew into the candle flame, and disappeared in the black space beyond. Olenin and Eroshka had emptied five bottles of chikhir. Eroshka filled the glasses every time, offering one to Olenin, drinking his health, and talking untiringly. He told of Cossack life in the old days: of his father, 'The Broad', who alone had carried on his back a boar's carcass weighing three hundredweight, and drank two pails of chikhir at one sitting. He told of his own days and his chum Girchik, with whom during the plague he used to smuggle felt cloaks across the Terek. He told how one morning he had killed two deer, and about his 'little soul' who used to run to him at the cordon at night. He told all this so eloquently and picturesquely that Olenin did not notice how time passed. 'Ah yes, my dear fellow, you did not know me in my golden days; then I'd have shown you things. Today it's "Eroshka licks the

jug", but then Eroshka was famous in the whole regiment. Whose was the finest horse? Who had a Gurda sword? To whom should one go to get a drink? With whom go on the spree? Who should be sent to the mountains to kill Ahmet Khan? Why, always Eroshka! Whom did the girls love? Always Eroshka had to answer for it. Because I was a real brave: a drinker, a thief (I used to seize herds of horses in the mountains), a singer; I was a master of every art! There are no Cossacks like that nowadays. It's disgusting to look at them. When they're that high [Eroshka held his hand three feet from the ground] they put on idiotic boots and keep looking at them--that's all the pleasure they know. Or they'll drink themselves foolish, not like men but all wrong. And who was I? I was Eroshka, the thief; they knew me not only in this village but up in the mountains. Tartar princes, my kunaks, used to come to see me! I used to be everybody's kunak. If he was a Tartar--with a Tartar; an Armenian--with an Armenian; a soldier--with a soldier; an officer--with an officer! I didn't care as long as he was a drinker. He says you should cleanse yourself from intercourse with the world, not drink with soldiers, not eat with a Tartar.'

'Who says all that?' asked Olenin.

'Why, our teacher! But listen to a Mullah or a Tartar Cadi. He says, "You unbelieving Giaours, why do you eat pig?" That shows that everyone has his own law. But I think it's all one. God has made everything for the joy of man. There is no sin in any of it. Take example from an animal. It lives in the Tartar's reeds or in ours. Wherever it happens

to go, there is its home! Whatever God gives it, that it eats! But our people say we have to lick red-hot plates in hell for that. And I think it's all a fraud,' he added after a pause.

'What is a fraud?' asked Olenin.

'Why, what the preachers say. We had an army captain in Chervlena who was my kunak: a fine fellow just like me. He was killed in Chechnya. Well, he used to say that the preachers invent all that out of their own heads. "When you die the grass will grow on your grave and that's all!" The old man laughed. 'He was a desperate fellow.'

'And how old are you?' asked Olenin.

'The Lord only knows! I must be about seventy. When a Tsaritsa reigned in Russia I was no longer very small. So you can reckon it out. I must be seventy.'

'Yes you must, but you are still a fine fellow.'

'Well, thank Heaven I am healthy, quite healthy, except that a woman, a witch, has harmed me....'

'How?'

'Oh, just harmed me.'

'And so when you die the grass will grow?' repeated Olenin.

Eroshka evidently did not wish to express his thought clearly. He was silent for a while.

'And what did you think? Drink!' he shouted suddenly, smiling and handing Olenin some wine.