

## Chapter XVII

From Eroshka's hut Lukashka went home. As he returned, the dewy mists were rising from the ground and enveloped the village. In various places the cattle, though out of sight, could be heard beginning to stir. The cocks called to one another with increasing frequency and insistence. The air was becoming more transparent, and the villagers were getting up. Not till he was close to it could Lukishka discern the fence of his yard, all wet with dew, the porch of the hut, and the open shed. From the misty yard he heard the sound of an axe chopping wood. Lukashka entered the hut. His mother was up, and stood at the oven throwing wood into it. His little sister was still lying in bed asleep.

'Well, Lukashka, had enough holiday-making?' asked his mother softly.

'Where did you spend the night?'

'I was in the village,' replied her son reluctantly, reaching for his musket, which he drew from its cover and examined carefully.

His mother swayed her head.

Lukashka poured a little gunpowder onto the pan, took out a little bag from which he drew some empty cartridge cases which he began filling, carefully plugging each one with a ball wrapped in a rag. Then, having tested the loaded cartridges with his teeth and examined them, he put

down the bag.

'I say, Mother, I told you the bags wanted mending; have they been done?' he asked.

'Oh yes, our dumb girl was mending something last night. Why, is it time for you to be going back to the cordon? I haven't seen anything of you!'

'Yes, as soon as I have got ready I shall have to go,' answered Lukashka, tying up the gunpowder. 'And where is our dumb one? Outside?'

'Chopping wood, I expect. She kept fretting for you. "I shall not see him at all!" she said. She puts her hand to her face like this, and clicks her tongue and presses her hands to her heart as much as to say--"sorry." Shall I call her in? She understood all about the abrek.'

'Call her,' said Lukashka. 'And I had some tallow there; bring it: I must grease my sword.'

The old woman went out, and a few minutes later Lukashka's dumb sister came up the creaking steps and entered the hut. She was six years older than her brother and would have been extremely like him had it not been for the dull and coarsely changeable expression (common to all deaf and dumb people) of her face. She wore a coarse smock all patched; her feet were bare and muddy, and on her head she had an old blue kerchief. Her

neck, arms, and face were sinewy like a peasant's. Her clothing and her whole appearance indicated that she always did the hard work of a man. She brought in a heap of logs which she threw down by the oven. Then she went up to her brother, and with a joyful smile which made her whole face pucker up, touched him on the shoulder and began making rapid signs to him with her hands, her face, and whole body.

'That's right, that's right, Stepka is a trump!' answered the brother, nodding. 'She's fetched everything and mended everything, she's a trump! Here, take this for it!' He brought out two pieces of gingerbread from his pocket and gave them to her.

The dumb woman's face flushed with pleasure, and she began making a weird noise for joy. Having seized the gingerbread she began to gesticulate still more rapidly, frequently pointing in one direction and passing her thick finger over her eyebrows and her face. Lukashka understood her and kept nodding, while he smiled slightly. She was telling him to give the girls dainties, and that the girls liked him, and that one girl, Maryanka--the best of them all--loved him. She indicated Maryanka by rapidly pointing in the direction of Maryanka's home and to her own eyebrows and face, and by smacking her lips and swaying her head. 'Loves' she expressed by pressing her hands to her breast, kissing her hand, and pretending to embrace someone. Their mother returned to the hut, and seeing what her dumb daughter was saying, smiled and shook her head. Her daughter showed her the gingerbread and again made the noise which expressed joy.

'I told Ulitka the other day that I'd send a matchmaker to them,' said the mother. 'She took my words well.'

Lukashka looked silently at his mother.

'But how about selling the wine, mother? I need a horse.'

'I'll cart it when I have time. I must get the barrels ready,' said the mother, evidently not wishing her son to meddle in domestic matters.

'When you go out you'll find a bag in the passage. I borrowed from the neighbours and got something for you to take back to the cordon; or shall I put it in your saddle-bag?'

'All right,' answered Lukashka. 'And if Girey Khan should come across the river send him to me at the cordon, for I shan't get leave again for a long time now; I have some business with him.'

He began to get ready to start.

'I will send him on,' said the old woman. 'It seems you have been spreeing at Yamka's all the time. I went out in the night to see the cattle, and I think it was your voice I heard singing songs.'

Lukashka did not reply, but went out into the passage, threw the bags over his shoulder, tucked up the skirts of his coat, took his musket,

and then stopped for a moment on the threshold.

'Good-bye, mother!' he said as he closed the gate behind him. 'Send me a small barrel with Nazarka. I promised it to the lads, and he'll call for it.'

'May Christ keep you, Lukashka. God be with you! I'll send you some, some from the new barrel,' said the old woman, going to the fence: 'But listen,' she added, leaning over the fence.

The Cossack stopped.

'You've been making merry here; well, that's all right. Why should not a young man amuse himself? God has sent you luck and that's good. But now look out and mind, my son. Don't you go and get into mischief. Above all, satisfy your superiors: one has to! And I will sell the wine and find money for a horse and will arrange a match with the girl for you.'

'All right, all right!' answered her son, frowning.

His deaf sister shouted to attract his attention. She pointed to her head and the palm of her hand, to indicate the shaved head of a Chechen. Then she frowned, and pretending to aim with a gun, she shrieked and began rapidly humming and shaking her head. This meant that Lukashka should kill another Chechen.

Lukashka understood. He smiled, and shifting the gun at his back under his cloak stepped lightly and rapidly, and soon disappeared in the thick mist.

The old woman, having stood a little while at the gate, returned silently to the hut and immediately began working.