

## Chapter XVIII

Lukasha returned to the cordon and at the same time Daddy Eroshka whistled to his dogs and, climbing over his wattle fence, went to Olenin's lodging, passing by the back of the houses (he disliked meeting women before going out hunting or shooting). He found Olenin still asleep, and even Vanyusha, though awake, was still in bed and looking round the room considering whether it was not time to get up, when Daddy Eroshka, gun on shoulder and in full hunter's trappings, opened the door.

'A cudgel!' he shouted in his deep voice. 'An alarm! The Chechens are upon us! Ivan! get the samovar ready for your master, and get up yourself--quick,' cried the old man. 'That's our way, my good man! Why even the girls are already up! Look out of the window. See, she's going for water and you're still sleeping!'

Olenin awoke and jumped up, feeling fresh and lighthearted at the sight of the old man and at the sound of his voice.

'Quick, Vanyusha, quick!' he cried.

'Is that the way you go hunting?' said the old man. 'Others are having their breakfast and you are asleep! Lyam! Here!' he called to his dog.

'Is your gun ready?' he shouted, as loud as if a whole crowd were in

the hut.

'Well, it's true I'm guilty, but it can't be helped! The powder, Vanyusha, and the wads!' said Olenin.

'A fine!' shouted the old man.

'Du tay voulay you?' asked Vanyusha, grinning.

'You're not one of us--your gabble is not like our speech, you devil!' the old man shouted at Vanyusha, showing the stumps of his teeth.

'A first offence must be forgiven,' said Olenin playfully, drawing on his high boots.

'The first offence shall be forgiven,' answered Eroshka, 'but if you oversleep another time you'll be fined a pail of chikhir. When it gets warmer you won't find the deer.'

'And even if we do find him he is wiser than we are,' said Olenin, repeating the words spoken by the old man the evening before, 'and you can't deceive him!'

'Yes, laugh away! You kill one first, and then you may talk. Now then, hurry up! Look, there's the master himself coming to see you,' added Eroshka, looking out of the window. 'Just see how he's got himself up.

He's put on a new coat so that you should see that he's an officer. Ah, these people, these people!

Sure enough Vanyusha came in and announced that the master of the house wished to see Olenin.

'L'arjan!' he remarked profoundly, to forewarn his master of the meaning of this visitation. Following him, the master of the house in a new Circassian coat with an officer's stripes on the shoulders and with polished boots (quite exceptional among Cossacks) entered the room, swaying from side to side, and congratulated his lodger on his safe arrival.

The cornet, Elias Vasilich, was an educated Cossack. He had been to Russia proper, was a regimental schoolteacher, and above all he was noble. He wished to appear noble, but one could not help feeling beneath his grotesque pretence of polish, his affectation, his self-confidence, and his absurd way of speaking, he was just the same as Daddy Eroshka. This could also be clearly seen by his sunburnt face and his hands and his red nose. Olenin asked him to sit down.

'Good morning. Father Elias Vasilich,' said Eroshka, rising with (or so it seemed to Olenin) an ironically low bow.

'Good morning. Daddy. So you're here already,' said the cornet, with a careless nod.

The cornet was a man of about forty, with a grey pointed beard, skinny and lean, but handsome and very fresh-looking for his age. Having come to see Olenin he was evidently afraid of being taken for an ordinary Cossack, and wanted to let Olenin feel his importance from the first.

'That's our Egyptian Nimrod,' he remarked, addressing Olenin and pointing to the old man with a self-satisfied smile. 'A mighty hunter before the Lord! He's our foremost man on every hand. You've already been pleased to get acquainted with him.'

Daddy Eroshka gazed at his feet in their shoes of wet raw hide and shook his head thoughtfully at the cornet's ability and learning, and muttered to himself: 'Gyptian Nimvrod! What things he invents!'

'Yes, you see we mean to go hunting,' answered Olenin.

'Yes, sir, exactly,' said the cornet, 'but I have a small business with you.'

'What do you want?'

'Seeing that you are a gentleman,' began the cornet, 'and as I may understand myself to be in the rank of an officer too, and therefore we may always progressively negotiate, as gentlemen do.' (He stopped and looked with a smile at Olenin and at the old man.) 'But if you have the

desire with my consent, then, as my wife is a foolish woman of our class, she could not quite comprehend your words of yesterday's date. Therefore my quarters might be let for six rubles to the Regimental Adjutant, without the stables; but I can always avert that from myself free of charge. But, as you desire, therefore I, being myself of an officer's rank, can come to an agreement with you in everything personally, as an inhabitant of this district, not according to our customs, but can maintain the conditions in every way....'

'Speaks clearly!' muttered the old man.

The cornet continued in the same strain for a long time. At last, not without difficulty, Olenin gathered that the cornet wished to let his rooms to him, Olenin, for six rubles a month. The latter gladly agreed to this, and offered his visitor a glass of tea. The cornet declined it.

'According to our silly custom we consider it a sort of sin to drink out of a "worldly" tumbler,' he said. 'Though, of course, with my education I may understand, but my wife from her human weakness...'

'Well then, will you have some tea?'

'If you will permit me, I will bring my own particular glass,' answered the cornet, and stepped out into the porch.

'Bring me my glass!' he cried.

In a few minutes the door opened and a young sunburnt arm in a print sleeve thrust itself in, holding a tumbler in the hand. The cornet went up, took it, and whispered something to his daughter. Olenin poured tea for the cornet into the latter's own 'particular' glass, and for Eroshka into a 'worldly' glass.

'However, I do not desire to detain you,' said the cornet, scalding his lips and emptying his tumbler. 'I too have a great liking for fishing, and I am here, so to say, only on leave of absence for recreation from my duties. I too have the desire to tempt fortune and see whether some Gifts of the Terek may not fall to my share. I hope you too will come and see us and have a drink of our wine, according to the custom of our village,' he added.

The cornet bowed, shook hands with Olenin, and went out. While Olenin was getting ready, he heard the cornet giving orders to his family in an authoritative and sensible tone, and a few minutes later he saw him pass by the window in a tattered coat with his trousers rolled up to his knees and a fishing net over his shoulder.

'A rascal!' said Daddy Eroshka, emptying his 'worldly' tumbler. 'And will you really pay him six rubles? Was such a thing ever heard of? They would let you the best hut in the village for two rubles. What a beast! Why, I'd let you have mine for three!'

'No, I'll remain here,' said Olenin.

'Six rubles! ... Clearly it's a fool's money. Eh, eh, eh! answered the old man. 'Let's have some chikhir, Ivan!'

Having had a snack and a drink of vodka to prepare themselves for the road, Olenin and the old man went out together before eight o'clock.

At the gate they came up against a wagon to which a pair of oxen were harnessed. With a white kerchief tied round her head down to her eyes, a coat over her smock, and wearing high boots, Maryanka with a long switch in her hand was dragging the oxen by a cord tied to their horns.

'Mammy,' said the old man, pretending that he was going to seize her.

Maryanka flourished her switch at him and glanced merrily at them both with her beautiful eyes.

Olenin felt still more light-hearted.

'Now then, come on, come on,' he said, throwing his gun on his shoulder and conscious of the girl's eyes upon him.

'Gee up!' sounded Maryanka's voice behind them, followed by the creak of the moving wagon.

As long as their road lay through the pastures at the back of the village Eroshka went on talking. He could not forget the cornet and kept on abusing him.

'Why are you so angry with him?' asked Olenin.

'He's stingy. I don't like it,' answered the old man. 'He'll leave it all behind when he dies! Then who's he saving up for? He's built two houses, and he's got a second garden from his brother by a law-suit. And in the matter of papers what a dog he is! They come to him from other villages to fill up documents. As he writes it out, exactly so it happens. He gets it quite exact. But who is he saving for? He's only got one boy and the girl; when she's married who'll be left?'

'Well then, he's saving up for her dowry,' said Olenin.

'What dowry? The girl is sought after, she's a fine girl. But he's such a devil that he must yet marry her to a rich fellow. He wants to get a big price for her. There's Luke, a Cossack, a neighbour and a nephew of mine, a fine lad. It's he who killed the Chechen--he has been wooing her for a long time, but he hasn't let him have her. He's given one excuse, and another, and a third. "The girl's too young," he says. But I know what he is thinking. He wants to keep them bowing to him. He's been acting shamefully about that girl. Still, they will get her for Lukashka, because he is the best Cossack in the village, a brave, who has killed an abrek and will be rewarded with a cross.'



'But how about this? When I was walking up and down the yard last night, I saw my landlord's daughter and some Cossack kissing,' said Olenin.

'You're pretending!' cried the old man, stopping.

'On my word,' said Olenin.

'Women are the devil,' said Eroshka pondering. 'But what Cossack was it?'

'I couldn't see.'

'Well, what sort of a cap had he, a white one?'

'Yes.'

'And a red coat? About your height?'

'No, a bit taller.'

'It's he!' and Eroshka burst out laughing. 'It's himself, it's Mark. He is Luke, but I call him Mark for a joke. His very self! I love him. I was just such a one myself. What's the good of minding them? My sweetheart used to sleep with her mother and her sister-in-law, but I

managed to get in. She used to sleep upstairs; that witch her mother was a regular demon; it's awful how she hated me. Well, I used to come with a chum, Girchik his name was. We'd come under her window and I'd climb on his shoulders, push up the window and begin groping about. She used to sleep just there on a bench. Once I woke her up and she nearly called out. She hadn't recognized me. "Who is there?" she said, and I could not answer. Her mother was even beginning to stir, but I took off my cap and shoved it over her mouth; and she at once knew it by a seam in it, and ran out to me. I used not to want anything then. She'd bring along clotted cream and grapes and everything,' added Eroshka (who always explained things practically), 'and she wasn't the only one. It was a life!'

'And what now?'

'Now we'll follow the dog, get a pheasant to settle on a tree, and then you may fire.'

'Would you have made up to Maryanka?'

'Attend to the dogs. I'll tell you tonight,' said the old man, pointing to his favourite dog, Lyam.

After a pause they continued talking, while they went about a hundred paces. Then the old man stopped again and pointed to a twig that lay across the path.

'What do you think of that?' he said. 'You think it's nothing? It's bad that this stick is lying so.'

'Why is it bad?'

He smiled.

'Ah, you don't know anything. Just listen to me. When a stick lies like that don't you step across it, but go round it or throw it off the path this way, and say "Father and Son and Holy Ghost," and then go on with God's blessing. Nothing will happen to you. That's what the old men used to teach me.'

'Come, what rubbish!' said Olenin. 'You'd better tell me more about Maryanka. Does she carry on with Lukashka?'

'Hush ... be quiet now!' the old man again interrupted in a whisper: 'just listen, we'll go round through the forest.'

And the old man, stepping quietly in his soft shoes, led the way by a narrow path leading into the dense, wild, overgrown forest. Now and again with a frown he turned to look at Olenin, who rustled and clattered with his heavy boots and, carrying his gun carelessly, several times caught the twigs of trees that grew across the path.

'Don't make a noise. Step softly, soldier!' the old man whispered angrily.

There was a feeling in the air that the sun had risen. The mist was dissolving but it still enveloped the tops of the trees. The forest looked terribly high. At every step the aspect changed: what had appeared like a tree proved to be a bush, and a reed looked like a tree.