

Chapter XXI

Suddenly it was as though the sun had shone into his soul. He heard Russian being spoken, and also heard the rapid smooth flow of the Terek, and a few steps farther in front of him saw the brown moving surface of the river, with the dim-coloured wet sand of its banks and shallows, the distant steppe, the cordon watch-tower outlined above the water, a saddled and hobbled horse among the brambles, and then the mountains opening out before him. The red sun appeared for an instant from under a cloud and its last rays glittered brightly along the river over the reeds, on the watch-tower, and on a group of Cossacks, among whom Lukashka's vigorous figure attracted Olenin's involuntary attention.

Olenin felt that he was again, without any apparent cause, perfectly happy. He had come upon the Nizhni-Prototsk post on the Terek, opposite a pro-Russian Tartar village on the other side of the river. He accosted the Cossacks, but not finding as yet any excuse for doing anyone a kindness, he entered the hut; nor in the hut did he find any such opportunity. The Cossacks received him coldly. On entering the mud hut he lit a cigarette. The Cossacks paid little attention to him, first because he was smoking a cigarette, and secondly because they had something else to divert them that evening. Some hostile Chechens, relatives of the abrek who had been killed, had come from the hills with a scout to ransom the body; and the Cossacks were waiting for

their Commanding Officer's arrival from the village. The dead man's brother, tall and well shaped with a short cropped beard which was dyed red, despite his very tattered coat and cap was calm and majestic as a king. His face was very like that of the dead abrek. He did not deign to look at anyone, and never once glanced at the dead body, but sitting on his heels in the shade he spat as he smoked his short pipe, and occasionally uttered some few guttural sounds of command, which were respectfully listened to by his companion. He was evidently a brave who had met Russians more than once before in quite other circumstances, and nothing about them could astonish or even interest him. Olenin was about to approach the dead body and had begun to look at it when the brother, looking up at him from under his brows with calm contempt, said something sharply and angrily. The scout hastened to cover the dead man's face with his coat. Olenin was struck by the dignified and stem expression of the brave's face. He began to speak to him, asking from what village he came, but the Chechen, scarcely giving him a glance, spat contemptuously and turned away. Olenin was so surprised at the Chechen not being interested in him that he could only put it down to the man's stupidity or ignorance of Russian; so he turned to the scout, who also acted as interpreter. The scout was as ragged as the other, but instead of being red-haired he was black-haired, restless, with extremely white gleaming teeth and sparkling black eyes. The scout willingly entered into conversation and asked for a cigarette.

'There were five brothers,' began the scout in his broken Russian.

'This is the third brother the Russians have killed, only two are left.

He is a brave, a great brave!' he said, pointing to the Chechen. 'When they killed Ahmet Khan (the dead brave) this one was sitting on the opposite bank among the reeds. He saw it all. Saw him laid in the skiff and brought to the bank. He sat there till the night and wished to kill the old man, but the others would not let him.'

Lukashka went up to the speaker, and sat down. 'Of what village?' asked he.

'From there in the hills,' replied the scout, pointing to the misty bluish gorge beyond the Terek. 'Do you know Suuk-su? It is about eight miles beyond that.'

'Do you know Girey Khan in Suuk-su?' asked Lukashka, evidently proud of the acquaintance. 'He is my kunak.'

'He is my neighbour,' answered the scout.

'He's a trump!' and Lukashka, evidently much interested, began talking to the scout in Tartar.

Presently a Cossack captain, with the head of the village, arrived on horseback with a suite of two Cossacks. The captain--one of the new type of Cossack officers--wished the Cossacks 'Good health,' but no one shouted in reply, 'Hail! Good health to your honour,' as is customary in the Russian Army, and only a few replied with a bow. Some, and among

them Lukashka, rose and stood erect. The corporal replied that all was well at the outposts. All this seemed ridiculous: it was as if these Cossacks were playing at being soldiers. But these formalities soon gave place to ordinary ways of behaviour, and the captain, who was a smart Cossack just like the others, began speaking fluently in Tartar to the interpreter. They filled in some document, gave it to the scout, and received from him some money. Then they approached the body.

'Which of you is Luke Gavrilov?' asked the captain.

Lukishka took off his cap and came forward.

'I have reported your exploit to the Commander. I don't know what will come of it. I have recommended you for a cross; you're too young to be made a sergeant. Can you read?'

'I can't.'

'But what a fine fellow to look at!' said the captain, again playing the commander. 'Put on your cap. Which of the Gavrilovs does he come of? ... the Broad, eh?'

'His nephew,' replied the corporal.

'I know, I know. Well, lend a hand, help them,' he said, turning to the Cossacks.

Lukashka's face shone with joy and seemed handsomer than usual. He moved away from the corporal, and having put on his cap sat down beside Olenin.

When the body had been carried to the skiff the brother Chechen descended to the bank. The Cossacks involuntarily stepped aside to let him pass. He jumped into the boat and pushed off from the bank with his powerful leg, and now, as Olenin noticed, for the first time threw a rapid glance at all the Cossacks and then abruptly asked his companion a question. The latter answered something and pointed to Lukashka. The Chechen looked at him and, turning slowly away, gazed at the opposite bank. That look expressed not hatred but cold contempt. He again made some remark.

'What is he saying?' Olenin asked of the fidgety scout.

'Yours kill ours, ours slay yours. It's always the same,' replied the scout, evidently inventing, and he smiled, showing his white teeth, as he jumped into the skiff.

The dead man's brother sat motionless, gazing at the opposite bank. He was so full of hatred and contempt that there was nothing on this side of the river that moved his curiosity. The scout, standing up at one end of the skiff and dipping his paddle now on one side now on the other, steered skilfully while talking incessantly. The skiff became

smaller and smaller as it moved obliquely across the stream, the voices became scarcely audible, and at last, still within sight, they landed on the opposite bank where their horses stood waiting. There they lifted out the corpse and (though the horse shied) laid it across one of the saddles, mounted, and rode at a foot-pace along the road past a Tartar village from which a crowd came out to look at them. The Cossacks on the Russian side of the river were highly satisfied and jovial. Laughter and jokes were heard on all sides. The captain and the head of the village entered the mud hut to regale themselves. Lukashka, vainly striving to impart a sedate expression to his merry face, sat down with his elbows on his knees beside Olenin and whittled away at a stick.

'Why do you smoke?' he said with assumed curiosity. 'Is it good?'

He evidently spoke because he noticed Olenin felt ill at ease and isolated among the Cossacks.

'It's just a habit,' answered Olenin. 'Why?'

'H'm, if one of us were to smoke there would be a row! Look there now, the mountains are not far off,' continued Lukashka, 'yet you can't get there! How will you get back alone? It's getting dark. I'll take you, if you like. You ask the corporal to give me leave.'

'What a fine fellow!' thought Olenin, looking at the Cossack's bright

face. He remembered Maryanka and the kiss he had heard by the gate, and he was sorry for Lukashka and his want of culture. 'What confusion it is,' he thought. 'A man kills another and is happy and satisfied with himself as if he had done something excellent. Can it be that nothing tells him that it is not a reason for any rejoicing, and that happiness lies not in killing, but in sacrificing oneself?'

'Well, you had better not meet him again now, mate!' said one of the Cossacks who had seen the skiff off, addressing Lukashka. 'Did you hear him asking about you?'

Lukashka raised his head.

'My godson?' said Lukashka, meaning by that word the dead Chechen.

'Your godson won't rise, but the red one is the godson's brother!'

'Let him thank God that he got off whole himself,' replied Lukashka.

'What are you glad about?' asked Olenin. 'Supposing your brother had been killed; would you be glad?'

The Cossack looked at Olenin with laughing eyes. He seemed to have understood all that Olenin wished to say to him, but to be above such considerations.

'Well, that happens too! Don't our fellows get killed sometimes?'