

## Chapter XXIV

It was five in the morning. Vanyusha was in the porch heating the samovar, and using the leg of a long boot instead of bellows. Olenin had already ridden off to bathe in the Terek. (He had recently invented a new amusement: to swim his horse in the river.) His landlady was in her outhouse, and the dense smoke of the kindling fire rose from the chimney. The girl was milking the buffalo cow in the shed. 'Can't keep quiet, the damned thing!' came her impatient voice, followed by the rhythmical sound of milking.

From the street in front of the house horses' hoofs were heard clattering briskly, and Olenin, riding bareback on a handsome dark-grey horse which was still wet and shining, rode up to the gate. Maryanka's handsome head, tied round with a red kerchief, appeared from the shed and again disappeared. Olenin was wearing a red silk shirt, a white Circassian coat girdled with a strap which carried a dagger, and a tall cap. He sat his well-fed wet horse with a slightly conscious elegance and, holding his gun at his back, stooped to open the gate.

His hair was still wet, and his face shone with youth and health. He thought himself handsome, agile, and like a brave; but he was mistaken. To any experienced Caucasian he was still only a soldier.

When he noticed that the girl had put out her head he stooped with

particular smartness, threw open the gate and, tightening the reins, swished his whip and entered the yard. 'Is tea ready, Vanyusha?' he cried gaily, not looking at the door of the shed. He felt with pleasure how his fine horse, pressing down its flanks, pulling at the bridle and with every muscle quivering and with each foot ready to leap over the fence, pranced on the hard clay of the yard. *'C'est prêt'*, answered Vanyusha. Olenin felt as if Maryanka's beautiful head was still looking out of the shed but he did not turn to look at her. As he jumped down from his horse he made an awkward movement and caught his gun against the porch, and turned a frightened look towards the shed, where there was no one to be seen and whence the sound of milking could still be heard.

Soon after he had entered the hut he came out again and sat down with his pipe and a book on the side of the porch which was not yet exposed to the rays of the sun. He meant not to go anywhere before dinner that day, and to write some long-postponed letters; but somehow he felt disinclined to leave his place in the porch, and he was as reluctant to go back into the hut as if it had been a prison. The housewife had heated her oven, and the girl, having driven the cattle, had come back and was collecting *kisyak* and heaping it up along the fence. Olenin went on reading, but did not understand a word of what was written in the book that lay open before him. He kept lifting his eyes from it and looking at the powerful young woman who was moving about. Whether she stepped into the moist morning shadow thrown by the house, or went out into the middle of the yard lit up by the

joyous young light, so that the whole of her stately figure in its bright coloured garment gleamed in the sunshine and cast a black shadow--he always feared to lose any one of her movements. It delighted him to see how freely and gracefully her figure bent: into what folds her only garment, a pink smock, draped itself on her bosom and along her shapely legs; how she drew herself up and her tight-drawn smock showed the outline of her heaving bosom, how the soles of her narrow feet in her worn red slippers rested on the ground without altering their shape; how her strong arms with the sleeves rolled up, exerting the muscles, used the spade almost as if in anger, and how her deep dark eyes sometimes glanced at him. Though the delicate brows frowned, yet her eyes expressed pleasure and a knowledge of her own beauty.

'I say, Olenin, have you been up long?' said Beletski as he entered the yard dressed in the coat of a Caucasian officer.

'Ah, Beletski,' replied Olenin, holding out his hand. 'How is it you are out so early?'

'I had to. I was driven out; we are having a ball tonight. Maryanka, of course you'll come to Ustenka's?' he added, turning to the girl.

Olenin felt surprised that Beletski could address this woman so easily. But Maryanka, as though she had not heard him, bent her head, and throwing the spade across her shoulder went with her firm masculine tread towards the outhouse.

'She's shy, the wench is shy,' Beletski called after her. 'Shy of you,' he added as, smiling gaily, he ran up the steps of the porch.

'How is it you are having a ball and have been driven out?'

'It's at Ustenka's, at my landlady's, that the ball is, and you two are invited. A ball consists of a pie and a gathering of girls.'

'What should we do there?'

Beletski smiled knowingly and winked, jerking his head in the direction of the outhouse into which Maryanka had disappeared.

Olenin shrugged his shoulders and blushed.

'Well, really you are a strange fellow!' said he.

'Come now, don't pretend!'

Olenin frowned, and Beletski noticing this smiled insinuatingly. 'Oh, come, what do you mean?' he said, 'living in the same house--and such a fine girl, a splendid girl, a perfect beauty.'

'Wonderfully beautiful! I never saw such a woman before,' replied Olenin.

'Well then?' said Beletski, quite unable to understand the situation.

'It may be strange,' replied Olenin, 'but why should I not say what is true? Since I have lived here women don't seem to exist for me. And it is so good, really! Now what can there be in common between us and women like these? Eroshka--that's a different matter! He and I have a passion in common--sport.'

'There now! In common! And what have I in common with Amalia Ivanovna? It's the same thing! You may say they're not very clean--that's another matter... A la guerre, comme a la guerre! ...'

'But I have never known any Amalia Ivanovas, and have never known how to behave with women of that sort,' replied Olenin. 'One cannot respect them, but these I do respect.'

'Well go on respecting them! Who wants to prevent you?'

Olenin did not reply. He evidently wanted to complete what he had begun to say. It was very near his heart.

'I know I am an exception...' He was visibly confused. 'But my life has so shaped itself that I not only see no necessity to renounce my rules, but I could not live here, let alone live as happily as I am doing, were I to live as you do. Therefore I look for something quite

different from what you look for.'

Beletski raised his eyebrows incredulously. 'Anyhow, come to me this evening; Maryanka will be there and I will make you acquainted. Do come, please! If you feel dull you can go away. Will you come?'

'I would come, but to speak frankly I am afraid of being' seriously carried away.'

'Oh, oh, oh!' shouted Beletski. 'Only come, and I'll see that you aren't. Will you? On your word?'

'I would come, but really I don't understand what we shall do; what part we shall play!'

'Please, I beg of you. You will come?'

'Yes, perhaps I'll come,' said Olenin.

'Really now! Charming women such as one sees nowhere else, and to live like a monk! What an idea! Why spoil your life and not make use of what is at hand? Have you heard that our company is ordered to Vozdvizhensk?'

'Hardly. I was told the 8th Company would be sent there,' said Olenin.

'No. I have had a letter from the adjutant there. He writes that the

Prince himself will take part in the campaign. I am very glad I shall see something of him. I'm beginning to get tired of this place.'

'I hear we shall start on a raid soon.'

'I have not heard of it; but I have heard that Krinovitsin has received the Order of St. Anna for a raid. He expected a lieutenancy,' said Beletski laughing. 'He was let in! He has set off for headquarters.'

It was growing dusk and Olenin began thinking about the party. The invitation he had received worried him. He felt inclined to go, but what might take place there seemed strange, absurd, and even rather alarming. He knew that neither Cossack men nor older women, nor anyone besides the girls, were to be there. What was going to happen? How was he to behave? What would they talk about? What connexion was there between him and those wild Cossack girls? Beletski had told him of such curious, cynical, and yet rigid relations. It seemed strange to think that he would be there in the same hut with Maryanka and perhaps might have to talk to her. It seemed to him impossible when he remembered her majestic bearing. But Beletski spoke of it as if it were all perfectly simple. 'Is it possible that Beletski will treat Maryanka in the same way? That is interesting,' thought he. 'No, better not go. It's all so horrid, so vulgar, and above all--it leads to nothing!' But again he was worried by the question of what would take place; and besides he felt as if bound by a promise. He went out without having made up his mind one way or the other, but he walked as far as Beletski's, and went

in there.

The hut in which Beletski lived was like Olenin's. It was raised nearly five feet from the ground on wooden piles, and had two rooms. In the first (which Olenin entered by the steep flight of steps) feather beds, rugs, blankets, and cushions were tastefully and handsomely arranged, Cossack fashion, along the main wall. On the side wall hung brass basins and weapons, while on the floor, under a bench, lay watermelons and pumpkins. In the second room there was a big brick oven, a table, and sectarian icons. It was here that Beletski was quartered, with his camp-bed and his pack and trunks. His weapons hung on the wall with a little rug behind them, and on the table were his toilet appliances and some portraits. A silk dressing-gown had been thrown on the bench. Beletski himself, clean and good-looking, lay on the bed in his underclothing, reading *Les Trois Mousquetaires*.

He jumped up.

'There, you see how I have arranged things. Fine! Well, it's good that you have come. They are working furiously. Do you know what the pie is made of? Dough with a stuffing of pork and grapes. But that's not the point. You just look at the commotion out there!'

And really, on looking out of the window they saw an unusual bustle going on in the hut. Girls ran in and out, now for one thing and now for another.



'Will it soon be ready?' cried Beletski.

'Very soon! Why? Is Grandad hungry?' and from the hut came the sound of ringing laughter.

Ustenka, plump, small, rosy, and pretty, with her sleeves turned up, ran into Beletski's hut to fetch some plates.

'Get away or I shall smash the plates!' she squeaked, escaping from Beletski. 'You'd better come and help,' she shouted to Olenin, laughing. 'And don't forget to get some refreshments for the girls.' ('Refreshments' meaning spicebread and sweets.)

'And has Maryanka come?'

'Of course! She brought some dough.'

'Do you know,' said Beletski, 'if one were to dress Ustenka up and clean and polish her up a bit, she'd be better than all our beauties. Have you ever seen that Cossack woman who married a colonel; she was charming! Borsheva? What dignity! Where do they get it...'

'I have not seen Borsheva, but I think nothing could be better than the costume they wear here.'

'Ah, I'm first-rate at fitting into any kind of life,' said Beletski with a sigh of pleasure. 'I'll go and see what they are up to.'

He threw his dressing-gown over his shoulders and ran out, shouting, 'And you look after the "refreshments".'

Olenin sent Beletski's orderly to buy spice-bread and honey; but it suddenly seemed to him so disgusting to give money (as if he were bribing someone) that he gave no definite reply to the orderly's question: 'How much spice-bread with peppermint, and how much with honey?'

'Just as you please.'

'Shall I spend all the money,' asked the old soldier impressively. 'The peppermint is dearer. It's sixteen kopeks.'

'Yes, yes, spend it all,' answered Olenin and sat down by the window, surprised that his heart was thumping as if he were preparing himself for something serious and wicked.

He heard screaming and shrieking in the girls' hut when Beletski went there, and a few moments later saw how he jumped out and ran down the steps, accompanied by shrieks, bustle, and laughter.

'Turned out,' he said.

A little later Ustenka entered and solemnly invited her visitors to come in: announcing that all was ready.

When they came into the room they saw that everything was really ready. Ustenka was rearranging the cushions along the wall. On the table, which was covered by a disproportionately small cloth, was a decanter of chikhir and some dried fish. The room smelt of dough and grapes. Some half dozen girls in smart tunics, with their heads not covered as usual with kerchiefs, were huddled together in a corner behind the oven, whispering, giggling, and spluttering with laughter.

'I humbly beg you to do honour to my patron saint,' said Ustenka, inviting her guests to the table.

Olenin noticed Maryanka among the group of girls, who without exception were all handsome, and he felt vexed and hurt that he met her in such vulgar and awkward circumstances. He felt stupid and awkward, and made up his mind to do what Beletski did. Beletski stepped to the table somewhat solemnly yet with confidence and ease, drank a glass of wine to Ustenka's health, and invited the others to do the same. Ustenka announced that girls don't drink. 'We might with a little honey,' exclaimed a voice from among the group of girls. The orderly, who had just returned with the honey and spice-cakes, was called in. He looked askance (whether with envy or with contempt) at the gentlemen, who in his opinion were on the spree; and carefully and conscientiously handed

over to them a piece of honeycomb and the cakes wrapped up in a piece of greyish paper, and began explaining circumstantially all about the price and the change, but Beletski sent him away. Having mixed honey with wine in the glasses, and having lavishly scattered the three pounds of spice-cakes on the table, Beletski dragged the girls from their corners by force, made them sit down at the table, and began distributing the cakes among them. Olenin involuntarily noticed how Maryanka's sunburnt but small hand closed on two round peppermint nuts and one brown one, and that she did not know what to do with them. The conversation was halting and constrained, in spite of Ustenka's and Beletski's free and easy manner and their wish to enliven the company. Olenin faltered, and tried to think of something to say, feeling that he was exciting curiosity and perhaps provoking ridicule and infecting the others with his shyness. He blushed, and it seemed to him that Maryanka in particular was feeling uncomfortable. 'Most likely they are expecting us to give them some money,' thought he. 'How are we to do it? And how can we manage quickest to give it and get away?'