

## Chapter XXV

'How is it you don't know your own lodger?' said Beletski, addressing Maryanka.

'How is one to know him if he never comes to see us?' answered Maryanka, with a look at Olenin.

Olenin felt frightened, he did not know of what. He flushed and, hardly knowing what he was saying, remarked: 'I'm afraid of your mother. She gave me such a scolding the first time I went in.'

Maryanka burst out laughing. 'And so you were frightened?' she said, and glanced at him and turned away.

It was the first time Olenin had seen the whole of her beautiful face. Till then he had seen her with her kerchief covering her to the eyes. It was not for nothing that she was reckoned the beauty of the village. Ustenka was a pretty girl, small, plump, rosy, with merry brown eyes, and red lips which were perpetually smiling and chattering. Maryanka on the contrary was certainly not pretty but beautiful. Her features might have been considered too masculine and almost harsh had it not been for her tall stately figure, her powerful chest and shoulders, and especially the severe yet tender expression of her long dark eyes which were darkly shadowed beneath their black brows, and for the gentle

expression of her mouth and smile. She rarely smiled, but her smile was always striking. She seemed to radiate virginal strength and health. All the girls were good-looking, but they themselves and Beletski, and the orderly when he brought in the spice-cakes, all involuntarily gazed at Maryanka, and anyone addressing the girls was sure to address her. She seemed a proud and happy queen among them.

Beletski, trying to keep up the spirit of the party, chattered incessantly, made the girls hand round chikhir, fooled about with them, and kept making improper remarks in French about Maryanka's beauty to Olenin, calling her 'yours' (*la votre*), and advising him to behave as he did himself. Olenin felt more and more uncomfortable. He was devising an excuse to get out and run away when Beletski announced that Ustenka, whose saint's day it was, must offer chikhir to everybody with a kiss. She consented on condition that they should put money on her plate, as is the custom at weddings.

'What fiend brought me to this disgusting feast?' thought Olenin, rising to go away.

'Where are you off to?'

'I'll fetch some tobacco,' he said, meaning to escape, but Beletski seized his hand.

'I have some money,' he said to him in French.

'One can't go away, one has to pay here,' thought Olenin bitterly, vexed at his own awkwardness. 'Can't I really behave like Beletski? I ought not to have come, but once I am here I must not spoil their fun. I must drink like a Cossack,' and taking the wooden bowl (holding about eight tumblers) he almost filled it with chikhir and drank it almost all. The girls looked at him, surprised and almost frightened, as he drank. It seemed to them strange and not right. Ustenka brought them another glass each, and kissed them both. 'There girls, now we'll have some fun,' she said, clinking on the plate the four rubles the men had put there.

Olenin no longer felt awkward, but became talkative.

'Now, Maryanka, it's your turn to offer us wine and a kiss,' said Beletski, seizing her hand.

'Yes, I'll give you such a kiss!' she said playfully, preparing to strike at him.

'One can kiss Grandad without payment,' said another girl.

'There's a sensible girl,' said Beletski, kissing the struggling girl.

'No, you must offer it,' he insisted, addressing Maryanka. 'Offer a glass to your lodger.'

And taking her by the hand he led her to the bench and sat her down beside Olenin.

'What a beauty,' he said, turning her head to see it in profile.

Maryanka did not resist but proudly smiling turned her long eyes towards Olenin.

'A beautiful girl,' repeated Beletski.

'Yes, see what a beauty I am,' Maryanka's look seemed to endorse.

Without considering what he was doing Olenin embraced Maryanka and was going to kiss her, but she suddenly extricated herself, upsetting Beletski and pushing the top off the table, and sprang away towards the oven. There was much shouting and laughter. Then Beletski whispered something to the girls and suddenly they all ran out into the passage and locked the door behind them.

'Why did you kiss Beletski and won't kiss me?' asked Olenin.

'Oh, just so. I don't want to, that's all!' she answered, pouting and frowning. 'He's Grandad,' she added with a smile. She went to the door and began to bang at it. 'Why have you locked the door, you devils?'

'Well, let them be there and us here,' said Olenin, drawing closer to her.

She frowned, and sternly pushed him away with her hand. And again she appeared so majestically handsome to Olenin that he came to his senses and felt ashamed of what he was doing. He went to the door and began pulling at it himself.

'Beletski! Open the door! What a stupid joke!'

Maryanka again gave a bright happy laugh. 'Ah, you're afraid of me?' she said.

'Yes, you know you're as cross as your mother.'

'Spend more of your time with Eroshka; that will make the girls love you!' And she smiled, looking straight and close into his eyes.

He did not know what to reply. 'And if I were to come to see you--' he let fall.

'That would be a different matter,' she replied, tossing her head.

At that moment Beletski pushed the door open, and Maryanka sprang away from Olenin and in doing so her thigh struck his leg.

'It's all nonsense what I have been thinking about--love and self-sacrifice and Lukashka. Happiness is the one thing. He who is

happy is right,' flashed through Olenin's mind, and with a strength unexpected to himself he seized and kissed the beautiful Maryanka on her temple and her cheek. Maryanka was not angry, but only burst into a loud laugh and ran out to the other girls.

That was the end of the party. Ustenka's mother, returned from her work, gave all the girls a scolding, and turned them all out.