

## Chapter XXVII

Just before the vintage Lukashka came on horseback to see Olenin. He looked more dashing than ever. 'Well? Are you getting married?' asked Olenin, greeting him merrily.

Lukashka gave no direct reply.

'There, I've exchanged your horse across the river. This is a horse! A Kabarda horse from the Lov stud. I know horses.'

They examined the new horse and made him caracole about the yard. The horse really was an exceptionally fine one, a broad and long gelding, with glossy coat, thick silky tail, and the soft fine mane and crest of a thoroughbred. He was so well fed that 'you might go to sleep on his back' as Lukashka expressed it. His hoofs, eyes, teeth, were exquisitely shaped and sharply outlined, as one only finds them in very pure-bred horses. Olenin could not help admiring the horse, he had not yet met with such a beauty in the Caucasus.

'And how it goes!' said Lukashka, patting its neck. 'What a step! And so clever--he simply runs after his master.'

'Did you have to add much to make the exchange?' asked Olenin.

'I did not count it,' answered Lukashka with a smile. 'I got him from a kunak.'

'A wonderfully beautiful horse! What would you take for it?' asked Olenin.

'I have been offered a hundred and fifty rubles for it, but I'll give it you for nothing,' said Lukashka, merrily. 'Only say the word and it's yours. I'll unsaddle it and you may take it. Only give me some sort of a horse for my duties.'

'No, on no account.'

'Well then, here is a dagger I've brought you,' said Lukashka, unfastening his girdle and taking out one of the two daggers which hung from it. 'I got it from across the river.'

'Oh, thank you!'

'And mother has promised to bring you some grapes herself.'

'That's quite unnecessary. We'll balance up some day. You see I don't offer you any money for the dagger!'

'How could you? We are kunaks. It's just the same as when Girey Khan across the river took me into his home and said,

"Choose what you like!" So I took this sword. It's our custom.'

They went into the hut and had a drink.

'Are you staying here awhile?' asked Olenin.

'No, I have come to say good-bye. They are sending me from the cordon to a company beyond the Terek. I am going to-night with my comrade Nazarka.'

'And when is the wedding to be?'

'I shall be coming back for the betrothal, and then I shall return to the company again,' Lukashka replied reluctantly.

'What, and see nothing of your betrothed?'

'Just so--what is the good of looking at her? When you go on campaign ask in our company for Lukashka the Broad. But what a lot of boars there are in our parts! I've killed two. I'll take you.' 'Well, good-bye! Christ save you.'

Lukashka mounted his horse, and without calling on Maryanka, rode caracoling down the street, where Nazarka was already awaiting him.

'I say, shan't we call round?' asked Nazarka, winking in the direction of Yamka's house.

'That's a good one!' said Lukashka. 'Here, take my horse to her and if I don't come soon give him some hay. I shall reach the company by the morning anyway.'

'Hasn't the cadet given you anything more?'

'I am thankful to have paid him back with a dagger--he was going to ask for the horse,' said Lukashka, dismounting and handing over the horse to Nazarka.

He darted into the yard past Olenin's very window, and came up to the window of the cornet's hut. It was already quite dark. Maryanka, wearing only her smock, was combing her hair preparing for bed.

'It's I--' whispered the Cossack.

Maryanka's look was severely indifferent, but her face suddenly brightened up when she heard her name. She opened the window and leant out, frightened and joyous.

'What--what do you want?' she said.

'Open!' uttered Lukashka. 'Let me in for a minute. I am so sick of

waiting! It's awful!

He took hold of her head through the window and kissed her.

'Really, do open!'

'Why do you talk nonsense? I've told you I won't! Have you come for long?'

He did not answer but went on kissing her, and she did not ask again.

'There, through the window one can't even hug you properly,' said Lukashka.

'Maryanka dear!' came the voice of her mother, 'who is that with you?'

Lukashka took off his cap, which might have been seen, and crouched down by the window.

'Go, be quick!' whispered Maryanka.

'Lukashka called round,' she answered; 'he was asking for Daddy.'

'Well then send him here!'

'He's gone; said he was in a hurry.'

In fact, Lukashka, stooping, as with big strides he passed under the windows, ran out through the yard and towards Yamka's house unseen by anyone but Olenin. After drinking two bowls of chikhir he and Nazarka rode away to the outpost. The night was warm, dark, and calm. They rode in silence, only the footfall of their horses was heard. Lukashka started a song about the Cossack, Mingal, but stopped before he had finished the first verse, and after a pause, turning to Nazarka, said:

'I say, she wouldn't let me in!'

'Oh?' rejoined Nazarka. 'I knew she wouldn't. D'you know what Yamka told me? The cadet has begun going to their house. Daddy Eroshka brags that he got a gun from the cadet for getting him Maryanka.'

'He lies, the old devil!' said Lukashka, angrily. 'She's not such a girl. If he does not look out I'll wallop that old devil's sides,' and he began his favourite song:

'From the village of Izmaylov,  
From the master's favourite garden,  
Once escaped a keen-eyed falcon.  
Soon after him a huntsman came a-riding,  
And he beckoned to the falcon that had strayed,  
But the bright-eyed bird thus answered:  
"In gold cage you could not keep me,

On your hand you could not hold me,

So now I fly to blue seas far away.

There a white swan I will kill,

Of sweet swan-flesh have my fill."