

Chapter XXVIII

The betrothal was taking place in the cornet's hut. Lukashka had returned to the village, but had not been to see Olenin, and Olenin had not gone to the betrothal though he had been invited. He was sad as he had never been since he settled in this Cossack village. He had seen Lukashka earlier in the evening and was worried by the question why Lukashka was so cold towards him. Olenin shut himself up in his hut and began writing in his diary as follows:

'Many things have I pondered over lately and much have I changed,' wrote he, 'and I have come back to the copybook maxim: The one way to be happy is to love, to love self-denyingly, to love everybody and everything; to spread a web of love on all sides and to take all who come into it. In this way I caught Vanyusha, Daddy Eroshka, Lukashka, and Maryanka.'

As Olenin was finishing this sentence Daddy Eroshka entered the room.

Eroshka was in the happiest frame of mind. A few evenings before this, Olenin had gone to see him and had found him with a proud and happy face deftly skinning the carcass of a boar with a small knife in the yard. The dogs (Lyam his pet among them) were lying close by watching what he was doing and gently wagging their tails. The little boys were respectfully looking at him through the fence and not even teasing him

as was their wont. His women neighbours, who were as a rule not too gracious towards him, greeted him and brought him, one a jug of chikhir, another some clotted cream, and a third a little flour. The next day Eroshka sat in his store-room all covered with blood, and distributed pounds of boar-flesh, taking in payment money from some and wine from others. His face clearly expressed, 'God has sent me luck. I have killed a boar, so now I am wanted.' Consequently, he naturally began to drink, and had gone on for four days never leaving the village. Besides which he had had something to drink at the betrothal.

He came to Olenin quite drunk: his face red, his beard tangled, but wearing a new beshmet trimmed with gold braid; and he brought with him a balalayka which he had obtained beyond the river. He had long promised Olenin this treat, and felt in the mood for it, so that he was sorry to find Olenin writing.

'Write on, write on, my lad,' he whispered, as if he thought that a spirit sat between him and the paper and must not be frightened away, and he softly and silently sat down on the floor. When Daddy Eroshka was drunk his favourite position was on the floor. Olenin looked round, ordered some wine to be brought, and continued to write. Eroshka found it dull to drink by himself and he wished to talk.

'I've been to the betrothal at the cornet's. But there! They're shwine!--Don't want them!--Have come to you.'

'And where did you get your balalayka asked Olenin, still writing.

'I've been beyond the river and got it there, brother mine,' he answered, also very quietly. 'I'm a master at it. Tartar or Cossack, squire or soldiers' songs, any kind you please.'

Olenin looked at him again, smiled, and went on writing.

That smile emboldened the old man.

'Come, leave off, my lad, leave off!' he said with sudden firmness.

'Well, perhaps I will.'

'Come, people have injured you but leave them alone, spit at them! Come, what's the use of writing and writing, what's the good?'

And he tried to mimic Olenin by tapping the floor with his thick fingers, and then twisted his big face to express contempt.

'What's the good of writing quibbles. Better have a spree and show you're a man!'

No other conception of writing found place in his head except that of legal chicanery.

Olenin burst out laughing and so did Eroshka. Then, jumping up from the floor, the latter began to show off his skill on the balalayka and to sing Tartar songs.

'Why write, my good fellow! You'd better listen to what I'll sing to you. When you're dead you won't hear any more songs. Make merry now!'

First he sang a song of his own composing accompanied by a dance:

'Ah, dee, dee, dee, dee, dee, dim, Say where did they last see him? In a booth, at the fair, He was selling pins, there.'

Then he sang a song he had learnt from his former sergeant-major:

'Deep I fell in love on Monday, Tuesday nothing did but sigh, Wednesday I popped the question, Thursday waited her reply. Friday, late, it came at last, Then all hope for me was past! Saturday my life to take I determined like a man, But for my salvation's sake Sunday morning changed my plan!'

Then he sang again:

'Oh dee, dee, dee, dee, dee, dim, Say where did they last see him?'

And after that, winking, twitching his shoulders, and footing it to the tune, he sang:

'I will kiss you and embrace, Ribbons red twine round you; And I'll call you little Grace. Oh, you little Grace now do Tell me, do you love me true?'

And he became so excited that with a sudden dashing movement he started dancing around the room accompanying himself the while.

Songs like 'Dee, dee, dee'--'gentlemen's songs'--he sang for Olenin's benefit, but after drinking three more tumblers of chikhir he remembered old times and began singing real Cossack and Tartar songs. In the midst of one of his favourite songs his voice suddenly trembled and he ceased singing, and only continued strumming on the balalayka.

'Oh, my dear friend!' he said.

The peculiar sound of his voice made Olenin look round.

The old man was weeping. Tears stood in his eyes and one tear was running down his cheek.

'You are gone, my young days, and will never come back!' he said, blubbering and halting. 'Drink, why don't you drink!' he suddenly shouted with a deafening roar, without wiping away his tears.

There was one Tartar song that specially moved him. It had few words,

but its charm lay in the sad refrain. 'Ay day, dalalay!' Eroshka translated the words of the song: 'A youth drove his sheep from the aoul to the mountains: the Russians came and burnt the aoul, they killed all the men and took all the women into bondage. The youth returned from the mountains. Where the aoul had stood was an empty space; his mother not there, nor his brothers, nor his house; one tree alone was left standing. The youth sat beneath the tree and wept. "Alone like thee, alone am I left," and Eroshka began singing: 'Ay day, dalalay!' and the old man repeated several times this wailing, heart-rending refrain.

When he had finished the refrain Eroshka suddenly seized a gun that hung on the wall, rushed hurriedly out into the yard and fired off both barrels into the air. Then again he began, more dolefully, his 'Ay day, dalalay--ah, ah,' and ceased.

Olenin followed him into the porch and looked up into the starry sky in the direction where the shots had flashed. In the cornet's house there were lights and the sound of voices. In the yard girls were crowding round the porch and the windows, and running backwards and forwards between the hut and the outhouse. Some Cossacks rushed out of the hut and could not refrain from shouting, re-echoing the refrain of Daddy Eroshka's song and his shots.

'Why are you not at the betrothal?' asked Olenin.

'Never mind them! Never mind them!' muttered the old man, who had evidently been offended by something there. 'Don't like them, I don't. Oh, those people! Come back into the hut! Let them make merry by themselves and we'll make merry by ourselves.'

Olenin went in.

'And Lukashka, is he happy? Won't he come to see me?' he asked.

'What, Lukashka? They've lied to him and said I am getting his girl for you,' whispered the old man. 'But what's the girl? She will be ours if we want her. Give enough money--and she's ours. I'll fix it up for you. Really!'

'No, Daddy, money can do nothing if she does not love me. You'd better not talk like that!'

'We are not loved, you and I. We are forlorn,' said Daddy Eroshka suddenly, and again he began to cry.

Listening to the old man's talk Olenin had drunk more than usual. 'So now my Lukashka is happy,' thought he; yet he felt sad. The old man had drunk so much that evening that he fell down on the floor and Vanyusha had to call soldiers in to help, and spat as they dragged the old man out. He was so angry with the old man for his bad behaviour that he did not even say a single French word.