

Chapter XXX

Although there was no escape from the heat and the mosquitoes swarmed in the cool shadow of the wagons, and her little brother tossing about beside her kept pushing her, Maryanka having drawn her kerchief over her head was just falling asleep, when suddenly their neighbour Ustenka came running towards her and, diving under the wagon, lay down beside her.

'Sleep, girls, sleep!' said Ustenka, making herself comfortable under the wagon. 'Wait a bit,' she exclaimed, 'this won't do!'

She jumped up, plucked some green branches, and stuck them through the wheels on both sides of the wagon and hung her beshmet over them.

'Let me in,' she shouted to the little boy as she again crept under the wagon. 'Is this the place for a Cossack--with the girls? Go away!'

When alone under the wagon with her friend, Ustenka suddenly put both her arms round her, and clinging close to her began kissing her cheeks and neck.

'Darling, sweetheart,' she kept repeating, between bursts of shrill, clear laughter.

'Why, you've learnt it from Grandad,' said Maryanka, struggling. 'Stop it!'

And they both broke into such peals of laughter that Maryanka's mother shouted to them to be quiet.

'Are you jealous?' asked Ustenka in a whisper.

'What humbug! Let me sleep. What have you come for?'

But Ustenka kept on, 'I say! But I wanted to tell you such a thing.'

Maryanka raised herself on her elbow and arranged the kerchief which had slipped off.

'Well, what is it?'

'I know something about your lodger!'

'There's nothing to know,' said Maryanka.

'Oh, you rogue of a girl!' said Ustenka, nudging her with her elbow and laughing. 'Won't tell anything. Does he come to you?'

'He does. What of that?' said Maryanka with a sudden blush.

'Now I'm a simple lass. I tell everybody. Why should I pretend?' said Ustenka, and her bright rosy face suddenly became pensive. 'Whom do I hurt? I love him, that's all about it.'

'Grandad, do you mean?'

'Well, yes!'

'And the sin?'

'Ah, Maryanka! When is one to have a good time if not while one's still free? When I marry a Cossack I shall bear children and shall have cares. There now, when you get married to Lukashka not even a thought of joy will enter your head: children will come, and work!'

'Well? Some who are married live happily. It makes no difference!'

Maryanka replied quietly.

'Do tell me just this once what has passed between you and Lukishka?'

'What has passed? A match was proposed. Father put it off for a year, but now it's been settled and they'll marry us in autumn.'

'But what did he say to you?' Maryanka smiled.

'What should he say? He said he loved me. He kept asking me to come to

the vineyards with him.'

'Just see what pitch! But you didn't go, did you? And what a dare-devil he has become: the first among the braves. He makes merry out there in the army too! The other day our Kirka came home; he says: "What a horse Lukashka's got in exchange!" But all the same I expect he frets after you. And what else did he say?'

'Must you know everything?' said Maryanka laughing. 'One night he came to my window tipsy, and asked me to let him in.' 'And you didn't let him?'

'Let him, indeed! Once I have said a thing I keep to it firm as a rock,' answered Maryanka seriously.

'A fine fellow! If he wanted her, no girl would refuse him.'

'Well, let him go to the others,' replied Maryanka proudly.

'You don't pity him?'

'I do pity him, but I'll have no nonsense. It is wrong.' Ustenka suddenly dropped her head on her friend's breast, seized hold of her, and shook with smothered laughter. 'You silly fool!' she exclaimed, quite out of breath. 'You don't want to be happy,' and she began tickling Maryanka. 'Oh, leave off!' said Maryanka, screaming and

laughing. 'You've crushed Lazutka.'

'Hark at those young devils! Quite frisky! Not tired yet!' came the old woman's sleepy voice from the wagon.

'Don't want happiness,' repeated Ustenka in a whisper, insistently.

'But you are lucky, that you are! How they love you! You are so crusty, and yet they love you. Ah, if I were in your place I'd soon turn the lodger's head! I noticed him when you were at our house. He was ready to eat you with his eyes. What things Grandad has given me! And yours they say is the richest of the Russians. His orderly says they have serfs of their own.'

Maryanka raised herself, and after thinking a moment, smiled.

'Do you know what he once told me: the lodger I mean?' she said, biting a bit of grass. 'He said, "I'd like to be Lukashka the Cossack, or your brother Lazutka--." What do you think he meant?'

'Oh, just chattering what came into his head,' answered Ustenka. 'What does mine not say! Just as if he was possessed!'

Maryanka dropped her hand on her folded beshmet, threw her arm over Ustenka's shoulder, and shut her eyes.

'He wanted to come and work in the vineyard to-day: father invited

him,' she said, and after a short silence she fell asleep.