

Chapter XXXIV

Late that evening, after writing this letter, Olenin went to his hosts' hut. The old woman was sitting on a bench behind the oven unwinding cocoons. Maryanka with her head uncovered sat sewing by the light of a candle. On seeing Olenin she jumped up, took her kerchief and stepped to the oven. 'Maryanka dear,' said her mother, 'won't you sit here with me a bit?' 'No, I'm bareheaded,' she replied, and sprang up on the oven. Olenin could only see a knee, and one of her shapely legs hanging down from the oven. He treated the old woman to tea. She treated her guest to clotted cream which she sent Maryanka to fetch. But having put a plateful on the table Maryanka again sprang on the oven from whence Olenin felt her eyes upon him. They talked about household matters. Granny Ulitka became animated and went into raptures of hospitality. She brought Olenin preserved grapes and a grape tart and some of her best wine, and pressed him to eat and drink with the rough yet proud hospitality of country folk, only found among those who produce their bread by the labour of their own hands. The old woman, who had at first struck Olenin so much by her rudeness, now often touched him by her simple tenderness towards her daughter.

'Yes, we need not offend the Lord by grumbling! We have enough of everything, thank God. We have pressed sufficient CHIKHIR and have preserved and shall sell three or four barrels of grapes and have enough left to drink. Don't be in a hurry to leave us. We will make

merry together at the wedding.'

'And when is the wedding to be?' asked Olenin, feeling his blood suddenly rush to his face while his heart beat irregularly and painfully.

He heard a movement on the oven and the sound of seeds being cracked.

'Well, you know, it ought to be next week. We are quite ready,' replied the old woman, as simply and quietly as though Olenin did not exist. 'I have prepared and have procured everything for Maryanka. We will give her away properly. Only there's one thing not quite right. Our Lukashka has been running rather wild. He has been too much on the spree! He's up to tricks! The other day a Cossack came here from his company and said he had been to Nogay.'

'He must mind he does not get caught,' said Olenin.

'Yes, that's what I tell him. "Mind, Lukashka, don't you get into mischief. Well, of course, a young fellow naturally wants to cut a dash. But there's a time for everything. Well, you've captured or stolen something and killed an abrek! Well, you're a fine fellow! But now you should live quietly for a bit, or else there'll be trouble."'

'Yes, I saw him a time or two in the division, he was always merry-making. He has sold another horse,' said Olenin, and glanced

towards the oven. A pair of large, dark, and hostile eyes glittered as they gazed severely at him.

He became ashamed of what he had said. 'What of it? He does no one any harm,' suddenly remarked Maryanka. 'He makes merry with his own money,' and lowering her legs she jumped down from the oven and went out banging the door.

Olenin followed her with his eyes as long as she was in the hut, and then looked at the door and waited, understanding nothing of what Granny Ulitka was telling him.

A few minutes later some visitors arrived: an old man, Granny Ulitka's brother, with Daddy Eroshka, and following them came Maryanka and Ustenka.

'Good evening,' squeaked Ustenka. 'Still on holiday?' she added, turning to Olenin.

'Yes, still on holiday,' he replied, and felt, he did not know why, ashamed and ill at ease.

He wished to go away but could not. It also seemed to him impossible to remain silent. The old man helped him by asking for a drink, and they had a drink. Olenin drank with Eroshka, with the other Cossack, and again with Eroshka, and the more he drank the heavier was his heart.

But the two old men grew merry. The girls climbed onto the oven, where they sat whispering and looking at the men, who drank till it was late. Olenin did not talk, but drank more than the others. The Cossacks were shouting. The old woman would not let them have any more chikhir, and at last turned them out. The girls laughed at Daddy Eroshka, and it was past ten when they all went out into the porch. The old men invited themselves to finish their merry-making at Olenin's. Ustenka ran off home and Eroshka led the old Cossack to Vanyusha. The old woman went out to tidy up the shed. Maryanka remained alone in the hut. Olenin felt fresh and joyous, as if he had only just woke up. He noticed everything, and having let the old men pass ahead he turned back to the hut where Maryanka was preparing for bed. He went up to her and wished to say something, but his voice broke. She moved away from him, sat down cross-legged on her bed in the corner, and looked at him silently with wild and frightened eyes. She was evidently afraid of him. Olenin felt this. He felt sorry and ashamed of himself, and at the same time proud and pleased that he aroused even that feeling in her.

'Maryanka!' he said. 'Will you never take pity on me? I can't tell you how I love you.'

She moved still farther away.

'Just hear how the wine is speaking! ... You'll get nothing from me!'

'No, it is not the wine. Don't marry Lukashka. I will marry you.'

('What am I saying,' he thought as he uttered these words. 'Shall I be able to say the same to-morrow?' 'Yes, I shall, I am sure I shall, and I will repeat them now,' replied an inner voice.)

'Will you marry me?'

She looked at him seriously and her fear seemed to have passed.

'Maryanka, I shall go out of my mind! I am not myself. I will do whatever you command,' and madly tender words came from his lips of their own accord.

'Now then, what are you drivelling about?' she interrupted, suddenly seizing the arm he was stretching towards her. She did not push his arm away but pressed it firmly with her strong hard fingers. 'Do gentlemen marry Cossack girls? Go away!'

'But will you? Everything...'

'And what shall we do with Lukashka?' said she, laughing.

He snatched away the arm she was holding and firmly embraced her young body, but she sprang away like a fawn and ran barefoot into the porch: Olenin came to his senses and was terrified at himself. He again felt himself inexpressibly vile compared to her, yet not repenting for an instant of what he had said he went home, and without even glancing at

the old men who were drinking in his room he lay down and fell asleep more soundly than he had done for a long time.