

Chapter XXXV

The next day was a holiday. In the evening all the villagers, their holiday clothes shining in the sunset, were out in the street. That season more wine than usual had been produced, and the people were now free from their labours. In a month the Cossacks were to start on a campaign and in many families preparations were being made for weddings.

Most of the people were standing in the square in front of the Cossack Government Office and near the two shops, in one of which cakes and pumpkin seeds were sold, in the other kerchiefs and cotton prints. On the earth-embankment of the office-building sat or stood the old men in sober grey, or black coats without gold trimmings or any kind of ornament. They conversed among themselves quietly in measured tones, about the harvest, about the young folk, about village affairs, and about old times, looking with dignified equanimity at the younger generation. Passing by them, the women and girls stopped and bent their heads. The young Cossacks respectfully slackened their pace and raised their caps, holding them for a while over their heads. The old men then stopped speaking. Some of them watched the passers-by severely, others kindly, and in their turn slowly took off their caps and put them on again.

The Cossack girls had not yet started dancing their khorovods, but having gathered in groups, in their bright coloured beshmets with white

kerchiefs on their heads pulled down to their eyes, they sat either on the ground or on the earth-banks about the huts sheltered from the oblique rays of the sun, and laughed and chattered in their ringing voices. Little boys and girls playing in the square sent their balls high up into the clear sky, and ran about squealing and shouting. The half-grown girls had started dancing their khorovods, and were timidly singing in their thin shrill voices. Clerks, lads not in the service, or home for the holiday, bright-faced and wearing smart white or new red Circassian gold-trimmed coats, went about arm in arm in twos or threes from one group of women or girls to another, and stopped to joke and chat with the Cossack girls. The Armenian shopkeeper, in a gold-trimmed coat of fine blue cloth, stood at the open door through which piles of folded bright-coloured kerchiefs were visible and, conscious of his own importance and with the pride of an Oriental tradesman, waited for customers. Two red-bearded, barefooted Chechens, who had come from beyond the Terek to see the fete, sat on their heels outside the house of a friend, negligently smoking their little pipes and occasionally spitting, watching the villagers and exchanging remarks with one another in their rapid guttural speech. Occasionally a workaday-looking soldier in an old overcoat passed across the square among the bright-clad girls. Here and there the songs of tipsy Cossacks who were merry-making could already be heard. All the huts were closed; the porches had been scrubbed clean the day before. Even the old women were out in the street, which was everywhere sprinkled with pumpkin and melon seed-shells. The air was warm and still, the sky deep and clear. Beyond the roofs the dead-white mountain range, which seemed very near,

was turning rosy in the glow of the evening sun. Now and then from the other side of the river came the distant roar of a cannon, but above the village, mingling with one another, floated all sorts of merry holiday sounds.

Olenin had been pacing the yard all that morning hoping to see Maryanka. But she, having put on holiday clothes, went to Mass at the chapel and afterwards sat with the other girls on an earth-embankment cracking seeds; sometimes again, together with her companions, she ran home, and each time gave the lodger a bright and kindly look. Olenin felt afraid to address her playfully or in the presence of others. He wished to finish telling her what he had begun to say the night before, and to get her to give him a definite answer. He waited for another moment like that of yesterday evening, but the moment did not come, and he felt that he could not remain any longer in this uncertainty. She went out into the street again, and after waiting awhile he too went out and without knowing where he was going he followed her. He passed by the corner where she was sitting in her shining blue satin beshmet, and with an aching heart he heard behind him the girls laughing.

Beletski's hut looked out onto the square. As Olenin was passing it he heard Beletski's voice calling to him, 'Come in,' and in he went.

After a short talk they both sat down by the window and were soon joined by Eroshka, who entered dressed in a new beshmet and sat down on the floor beside them.

'There, that's the aristocratic party,' said Beletski, pointing with his cigarette to a brightly coloured group at the corner. 'Mine is there too. Do you see her? in red. That's a new beshmet. Why don't you start the khorovod?' he shouted, leaning out of the window. 'Wait a bit, and then when it grows dark let us go too. Then we will invite them to Ustenka's. We must arrange a ball for them!'

'And I will come to Ustenka's,' said Olenin in a decided tone. 'Will Maryanka be there?'

'Yes, she'll be there. Do come!' said Beletski, without the least surprise. 'But isn't it a pretty picture?' he added, pointing to the motley crowds.

'Yes, very!' Olenin assented, trying to appear indifferent.

'Holidays of this kind,' he added, 'always make me wonder why all these people should suddenly be contented and jolly. To-day for instance, just because it happens to be the fifteenth of the month, everything is festive. Eyes and faces and voices and movements and garments, and the air and the sun, are all in a holiday mood. And we no longer have any holidays!'

'Yes,' said Beletski, who did not like such reflections.

'And why are you not drinking, old fellow?' he said, turning to Eroshka.

Eroshka winked at Olenin, pointing to Beletski. 'Eh, he's a proud one that kunak of yours,' he said.

Beletski raised his glass. ALLAH BIRDY' he said, emptying it. (ALLAH BIRDY, 'God has given!'--the usual greeting of Caucasians when drinking together.)

'Sau bul' ('Your health'), answered Eroshka smiling, and emptied his glass.

'Speaking of holidays!' he said, turning to Olenin as he rose and looked out of the window, 'What sort of holiday is that! You should have seen them make merry in the old days! The women used to come out in their gold--trimmed sarafans. Two rows of gold coins hanging round their necks and gold-cloth diadems on their heads, and when they passed they made a noise, "flu, flu," with their dresses. Every woman looked like a princess. Sometimes they'd come out, a whole herd of them, and begin singing songs so that the air seemed to rumble, and they went on making merry all night. And the Cossacks would roll out a barrel into the yards and sit down and drink till break of day, or they would go hand-in-hand sweeping the village. Whoever they met they seized and took along with them, and went from house to house. Sometimes they used to make merry for three days on end. Father used to come home--I still remember it--quite red and swollen, without a cap, having lost

everything: he'd come and lie down. Mother knew what to do: she would bring him some fresh caviar and a little chikhir to sober him up, and would herself run about in the village looking for his cap. Then he'd sleep for two days! That's the sort of fellows they were then! But now what are they?'

'Well, and the girls in the sarafans, did they make merry all by themselves?' asked Beletski.

'Yes, they did! Sometimes Cossacks would come on foot or on horse and say, "Let's break up the khorovods," and they'd go, but the girls would take up cudgels. Carnival week, some young fellow would come galloping up, and they'd cudgel his horse and cudgel him too. But he'd break through, seize the one he loved, and carry her off. And his sweetheart would love him to his heart's content! Yes, the girls in those days, they were regular queens!'