

Chapter XXXVI

Just then two men rode out of the side street into the square. One of them was Nazarka. The other, Lukashka, sat slightly sideways on his well-fed bay Kabarda horse which stepped lightly over the hard road jerking its beautiful head with its fine glossy mane. The well-adjusted gun in its cover, the pistol at his back, and the cloak rolled up behind his saddle showed that Lukashka had not come from a peaceful place or from one near by. The smart way in which he sat a little sideways on his horse, the careless motion with which he touched the horse under its belly with his whip, and especially his half-closed black eyes, glistening as he looked proudly around him, all expressed the conscious strength and self-confidence of youth. 'Ever seen as fine a lad?' his eyes, looking from side to side, seemed to say. The elegant horse with its silver ornaments and trappings, the weapons, and the handsome Cossack himself attracted the attention of everyone in the square. Nazarka, lean and short, was much less well dressed. As he rode past the old men, Lukashka paused and raised his curly white sheepskin cap above his closely cropped black head.

'Well, have you carried off many Nogay horses?' asked a lean old man with a frowning, lowering look.

'Have you counted them, Grandad, that you ask?' replied Lukashka, turning away.

'That's all very well, but you need not take my lad along with you,' the old man muttered with a still darker frown.

'Just see the old devil, he knows everything,' muttered Lukashka to himself, and a worried expression came over his face; but then, noticing a corner where a number of Cossack girls were standing, he turned his horse towards them.

'Good evening, girls!' he shouted in his powerful, resonant voice, suddenly checking his horse. 'You've grown old without me, you witches!' and he laughed.

'Good evening, Lukashka! Good evening, laddie!' the merry voices answered. 'Have you brought much money? Buy some sweets for the girls! ... Have you come for long? True enough, it's long since we saw you....'

'Nazarka and I have just flown across to make a night of it,' replied Lukashka, raising his whip and riding straight at the girls.

'Why, Maryanka has quite forgotten you,' said Ustenka, nudging Maryanka with her elbow and breaking into a shrill laugh.

Maryanka moved away from the horse and throwing back her head calmly looked at the Cossack with her large sparkling eyes.

'True enough, you have not been home for a long time! Why are you trampling us under your horse?' she remarked dryly, and turned away.

Lukashka had appeared particularly merry. His face shone with audacity and joy. Obviously staggered by Maryanka's cold reply he suddenly knitted his brow.

'Step up on my stirrup and I'll carry you away to the mountains. Mammy!' he suddenly exclaimed, and as if to disperse his dark thoughts he caracoled among the girls. Stooping down towards Maryanka, he said, 'I'll kiss, oh, how I'll kiss you! ...'

Maryanka's eyes met his and she suddenly blushed and stepped back.

'Oh, bother you! you'll crush my feet,' she said, and bending her head looked at her well-shaped feet in their tightly fitting light blue stockings with clocks and her new red slippers trimmed with narrow silver braid.

Lukashka turned towards Ustenka, and Maryanka sat down next to a woman with a baby in her arms. The baby stretched his plump little hands towards the girl and seized a necklace string that hung down onto her blue beshmet. Maryanka bent towards the child and glanced at Lukashka from the corner of her eyes. Lukashka just then was getting out from under his coat, from the pocket of his black beshmet, a bundle of sweetmeats and seeds.

'There, I give them to all of you,' he said, handing the bundle to Ustenka and smiling at Maryanka.

A confused expression again appeared on the girl's face. It was as though a mist gathered over her beautiful eyes. She drew her kerchief down below her lips, and leaning her head over the fair-skinned face of the baby that still held her by her coin necklace she suddenly began to kiss it greedily. The baby pressed his little hands against the girl's high breasts, and opening his toothless mouth screamed loudly.

"You're smothering the boy!" said the little one's mother, taking him away; and she unfastened her beshmet to give him the breast. "You'd better have a chat with the young fellow."

"I'll only go and put up my horse and then Nazarka and I will come back; we'll make merry all night," said Lukashka, touching his horse with his whip and riding away from the girls.

Turning into a side street, he and Nazarka rode up to two huts that stood side by side.

"Here we are all right, old fellow! Be quick and come soon!" called Lukashka to his comrade, dismounting in front of one of the huts; then he carefully led his horse in at the gate of the wattle fence of his own home.

"How d'you do, Stepka?" he said to his dumb sister, who, smartly dressed like the others, came in from the street to take his horse; and he made signs to her to take the horse to the hay, but not to unsaddle it.

The dumb girl made her usual humming noise, smacked her lips as she pointed to the horse and kissed it on the nose, as much as to say that she loved it and that it was a fine horse.

"How d'you do. Mother? How is it that you have not gone out yet?" shouted Lukashka, holding his gun in place as he mounted the steps of the porch.

His old mother opened the door.

"Dear me! I never expected, never thought, you'd come," said the old woman. "Why, Kirka said you wouldn't be here."

"Go and bring some chikhir, Mother. Nazarka is coming here and we will celebrate the feast day."

"Directly, Lukashka, directly!" answered the old woman. "Our women are making merry. I expect our dumb one has gone too."

She took her keys and hurriedly went to the outhouse. Nazarka, after

putting up his horse and taking the gun off his shoulder, returned to Lukashka's house and went in.