

Chapter XXXVII

'Your health!' said Lukashka, taking from his mother's hands a cup filled to the brim with chikhir and carefully raising it to his bowed head.

'A bad business!' said Nazarka. 'You heard how Daddy Burlak said, "Have you stolen many horses?" He seems to know!'

'A regular wizard!' Lukashka replied shortly. 'But what of it!' he added, tossing his head. 'They are across the river by now. Go and find them!'

'Still it's a bad lookout.'

'What's a bad lookout? Go and take some chikhir to him to-morrow and nothing will come of it. Now let's make merry. Drink!' shouted Lukashka, just in the tone in which old Eroshka uttered the word.

'We'll go out into the street and make merry with the girls. You go and get some honey; or no, I'll send our dumb wench. We'll make merry till morning.'

Nazarka smiled.

'Are we stopping here long?' he asked.

Till we've had a bit of fun. Run and get some vodka. Here's the money.'

Nazarka ran off obediently to get the vodka from Yamka's.

Daddy Eroshka and Ergushov, like birds of prey, scenting where the merry-making was going on, tumbled into the hut one after the other, both tipsy.

'Bring us another half-pail,' shouted Lukashka to his mother, by way of reply to their greeting.

'Now then, tell us where did you steal them, you devil?' shouted Eroshka. 'Fine fellow, I'm fond of you!'

'Fond indeed...' answered Lukashka laughing, 'carrying sweets from cadets to lasses! Eh, you old...'

'That's not true, not true! ... Oh, Mark,' and the old man burst out laughing. 'And how that devil begged me. "Go," he said, "and arrange it." He offered me a gun! But no. I'd have managed it, but I feel for you. Now tell us where have you been?' And the old man began speaking in Tartar.

Lukashka answered him promptly.

Ergushov, who did not know much Tartar, only occasionally put in a word in Russian: 'What I say is he's driven away the horses. I know it for a fact,' he chimed in.

'Girey and I went together.' (His speaking of Girey Khan as 'Girey' was, to the Cossack mind, evidence of his boldness.) 'Just beyond the river he kept bragging that he knew the whole of the steppe and would lead the way straight, but we rode on and the night was dark, and my Girey lost his way and began wandering in a circle without getting anywhere: couldn't find the village, and there we were. We must have gone too much to the right. I believe we wandered about well--nigh till midnight. Then, thank goodness, we heard dogs howling.'

'Fools!' said Daddy Eroshka. 'There now, we too used to lose our way in the steppe. (Who the devil can follow it?) But I used to ride up a hillock and start howling like the wolves, like this!' He placed his hands before his mouth, and howled like a pack of wolves, all on one note. 'The dogs would answer at once ... Well, go on--so you found them?'

'We soon led them away! Nazarka was nearly caught by some Nogay women, he was!'

'Caught indeed,' Nazarka, who had just come back, said in an injured tone.

'We rode off again, and again Girey lost his way and almost landed us among the sand-drifts. We thought we were just getting to the Terek but we were riding away from it all the time!'

'You should have steered by the stars,' said Daddy Eroshka.

'That's what I say,' interjected Ergushov,

'Yes, steer when all is black; I tried and tried all about... and at last I put the bridle on one of the mares and let my own horse go free--thinking he'll lead us out, and what do you think! he just gave a snort or two with his nose to the ground, galloped ahead, and led us straight to our village. Thank goodness! It was getting quite light. We barely had time to hide them in the forest. Nagim came across the river and took them away.'

Ergushov shook his head. 'It's just what I said. Smart. Did you get much for them?'

'It's all here,' said Lukashka, slapping his pocket.

Just then his mother came into the room, and Lukashka did not finish what he was saying.

'Drink!' he shouted.

'We too, Girich and I, rode out late one night...' began Eroshka.

'Oh bother, we'll never hear the end of you!' said Lukashka. 'I am going.' And having emptied his cup and tightened the strap of his belt he went out.