

Chapter XXXVIII

It was already dark when Lukashka went out into the street. The autumn night was fresh and calm. The full golden moon floated up behind the tall dark poplars that grew on one side of the square. From the chimneys of the outhouses smoke rose and spread above the village, mingling with the mist. Here and there lights shone through the windows, and the air was laden with the smell of kisyak, grape-pulp, and mist. The sounds of voices, laughter, songs, and the cracking of seeds mingled just as they had done in the daytime, but were now more distinct. Clusters of white kerchiefs and caps gleamed through the darkness near the houses and by the fences.

In the square, before the shop door which was lit up and open, the black and white figures of Cossack men and maids showed through the darkness, and one heard from afar their loud songs and laughter and talk. The girls, hand in hand, went round and round in a circle stepping lightly in the dusty square. A skinny girl, the plainest of them all, set the tune:

'From beyond the wood, from the forest dark,
From the garden green and the shady park,
There came out one day two young lads so gay.
Young bachelors, hey! brave and smart were they!
And they walked and walked, then stood still, each man,

And they talked and soon to dispute began!
Then a maid came out; as she came along,
Said, "To one of you I shall soon belong!"
'Twas the fair-faced lad got the maiden fair,
Yes, the fair-faced lad with the golden hair!
Her right hand so white in his own took he,
And he led her round for his mates to see!
And said, "Have you ever in all your life,
Met a lass as fair as my sweet little wife?"

The old women stood round listening to the songs. The little boys and girls ran about chasing one another in the dark. The men stood by, catching at the girls as the latter moved round, and sometimes breaking the ring and entering it. On the dark side of the doorway stood Beletski and Olenin, in their Circassian coats and sheepskin caps, and talked together in a style of speech unlike that of the Cossacks, in low but distinct tones, conscious that they were attracting attention. Next to one another in the khorovod circle moved plump little Ustenka in her red beshmet and the stately Maryanka in her new smock and beshmet. Olenin and Beletski were discussing how to snatch Ustenka and Maryanka out of the ring. Beletski thought that Olenin wished only to amuse himself, but Olenin was expecting his fate to be decided. He wanted at any cost to see Maryanka alone that very day and to tell her everything, and ask her whether she could and would be his wife. Although that question had long been answered in the negative in his own mind, he hoped he would be able to tell her all he felt, and that

she would understand him.

'Why did you not tell me sooner?' said Beletski. 'I would have got Ustenka to arrange it for you. You are such a queer fellow! ...'

'What's to be done! ... Some day, very soon, I'll tell you all about it. Only now, for Heaven's sake, arrange so that she should come to Ustenka's.'

'All right, that's easily done! Well, Maryanka, will you belong to the "fair-faced lad", and not to Lukashka?' said Beletski, speaking to Maryanka first for propriety's sake, but having received no reply he went up to Ustenka and begged her to bring Maryanka home with her. He had hardly time to finish what he was saying before the leader began another song and the girls started pulling each other round in the ring by the hand.

They sang:

"Past the garden, by the garden,
A young man came strolling down,
Up the street and through the town.
And the first time as he passed
He did wave his strong right hand.
As the second time he passed
Waved his hat with silken band.

But the third time as he went
He stood still: before her bent.

"How is it that thou, my dear,
My reproaches dost not fear?
In the park don't come to walk
That we there might have a talk?
Come now, answer me, my dear,
Dost thou hold me in contempt?
Later on, thou knowest, dear,
Thou'lt get sober and repent.
Soon to woo thee I will come,
And when we shall married be
Thou wilt weep because of me!"

"Though I knew what to reply,
Yet I dared not him deny,
No, I dared not him deny!
So into the park went I,
In the park my lad to meet,
There my dear one I did greet."

"Maiden dear, I bow to thee!
Take this handkerchief from me.
In thy white hand take it, see!
Say I am beloved by thee.

I don't know at all, I fear,
What I am to give thee, dear!
To my dear I think I will
Of a shawl a present make--
And five kisses for it take."

Lukashka and Nazarka broke into the ring and started walking about among the girls. Lukashka joined in the singing, taking seconds in his clear voice as he walked in the middle of the ring swinging his arms. 'Well, come in, one of you!' he said. The other girls pushed Maryanka, but she would not enter the ring. The sound of shrill laughter, slaps, kisses, and whispers mingled with the singing.

As he went past Olenin, Lukashka gave a friendly nod.

'Dmitri Andreich! Have you too come to have a look?' he said.

'Yes,' answered Olenin dryly.

Beletski stooped and whispered something into Ustenka's ear. She had not time to reply till she came round again, when she said:

'All right, we'll come.'

'And Maryanka too?'

Olenin stooped towards Maryanka. 'You'll come? Please do, if only for a minute. I must speak to you.'

'If the other girls come, I will.'

'Will you answer my question?' said he, bending towards her. 'You are in good spirits to-day.'

She had already moved past him. He went after her.

'Will you answer?'

'Answer what?'

'The question I asked you the other day,' said Olenin, stooping to her ear. 'Will you marry me?'

Maryanka thought for a moment.

'I'll tell you,' said she, 'I'll tell you to-night.'

And through the darkness her eyes gleamed brightly and kindly at the young man.

He still followed her. He enjoyed stooping closer to her. But Lukashka, without ceasing to sing, suddenly seized her firmly by the hand and

pulled her from her place in the ring of girls into the middle. Olenin had only time to say, "Come to Ustenka's," and stepped back to his companion.

The song came to an end. Lukashka wiped his lips, Maryanka did the same, and they kissed. "No, no, kisses five!" said Lukashka. Chatter, laughter, and running about, succeeded to the rhythmic movements and sound. Lukashka, who seemed to have drunk a great deal, began to distribute sweetmeats to the girls.

"I offer them to everyone!" he said with proud, comically pathetic self-admiration. "But anyone who goes after soldiers goes out of the ring!" he suddenly added, with an angry glance at Olenin.

The girls grabbed his sweetmeats from him, and, laughing, struggled for them among themselves. Beletski and Olenin stepped aside.

Lukashka, as if ashamed of his generosity, took off his cap and wiping his forehead with his sleeve came up to Maryanka and Ustenka.

"Answer me, my dear, dost thou hold me in contempt?" he said in the words of the song they had just been singing, and turning to Maryanka he angrily repeated the words: "Dost thou hold me in contempt? When we shall married be thou wilt weep because of me!" he added, embracing Ustenka and Maryanka both together.

Ustenka tore herself away, and swinging her arm gave him such a blow on the back that she hurt her hand.

"Well, are you going to have another turn?" he asked.

"The other girls may if they like," answered Ustenka, "but I am going home and Maryanka was coming to our house too."

With his arm still round her, Lukashka led Maryanka away from the crowd to the darker corner of a house.

"Don't go, Maryanka," he said, "let's have some fun for the last time. Go home and I will come to you!"

"What am I to do at home? Holidays are meant for merrymaking. I am going to Ustenka's," replied Maryanka.

'I'll marry you all the same, you know!'

'All right,' said Maryanka, 'we shall see when the time comes.'

'So you are going,' said Lukashka sternly, and, pressing her close, he kissed her on the cheek.

'There, leave off! Don't bother,' and Maryanka, wrenching herself from his arms, moved away.

'Ah my girl, it will turn out badly,' said Lukashka reproachfully and stood still, shaking his head. 'Thou wilt weep because of me...' and turning away from her he shouted to the other girls:

'Now then! Play away!'

What he had said seemed to have frightened and vexed Maryanka. She stopped, 'What will turn out badly?'

'Why, that!'

'That what?'

'Why, that you keep company with a soldier-lodger and no longer care for me!'

'I'll care just as long as I choose. You're not my father, nor my mother. What do you want? I'll care for whom I like!'

'Well, all right...' said Lukashka, 'but remember!' He moved towards the shop. 'Girls!' he shouted, 'why have you stopped? Go on dancing. Nazarka, fetch some more chikhir.'

'Well, will they come?' asked Olenin, addressing Beletski.

'They'll come directly,' replied Beletski. 'Come along, we must prepare the ball.'