

Chapter XLI

'Are they far?' was all Lukashka said.

Just then they heard a sharp shot some thirty paces off. The corporal smiled slightly.

'Our Gurka is having shots at them,' he said, nodding in the direction of the shot.

Having gone a few paces farther they saw Gurka sitting behind a sand-hillock and loading his gun. To while away the time he was exchanging shots with the ABREKS, who were behind another sand-heap. A bullet came whistling from their side.

The cornet was pale and grew confused. Lukashka dismounted from his horse, threw the reins to one of the other Cossacks, and went up to Gurka. Olenin also dismounted and, bending down, followed Lukashka. They had hardly reached Gurka when two bullets whistled above them.

Lukashka looked around laughing at Olenin and stooped a little.

'Look out or they will kill you, Dmitri Andreich,' he said. 'You'd better go away--you have no business here.' But Olenin wanted absolutely to see the ABREKS.

From behind the mound he saw caps and muskets some two hundred paces off. Suddenly a little cloud of smoke appeared from thence, and again a bullet whistled past. The ABREKS were hiding in a marsh at the foot of the hill. Olenin was much impressed by the place in which they sat. In reality it was very much like the rest of the steppe, but because the ABREKS sat there it seemed to detach itself from all the rest and to have become distinguished. Indeed it appeared to Olenin that it was the very spot for ABREKS to occupy. Lukashka went back to his horse and Olenin followed him.

'We must get a hay-cart,' said Lukashka, 'or they will be killing some of us. There behind that mound is a Nogay cart with a load of hay.'

The cornet listened to him and the corporal agreed. The cart of hay was fetched, and the Cossacks, hiding behind it, pushed it forward. Olenin rode up a hillock from whence he could see everything. The hay-cart moved on and the Cossacks crowded together behind it. The Cossacks advanced, but the Chechens, of whom there were nine, sat with their knees in a row and did not fire.

All was quiet. Suddenly from the Chechens arose the sound of a mournful song, something like Daddy Eroshka's 'Ay day, dalalay.' The Chechens knew that they could not escape, and to prevent themselves from being tempted to take to flight they had strapped themselves together, knee to knee, had got their guns ready, and were singing their death-song.

The Cossacks with their hay-cart drew closer and closer, and Olenin expected the firing to begin at any moment, but the silence was only broken by the abreks' mournful song. Suddenly the song ceased; there was a sharp report, a bullet struck the front of the cart, and Chechen curses and yells broke the silence and shot followed on shot and one bullet after another struck the cart. The Cossacks did not fire and were now only five paces distant.

Another moment passed and the Cossacks with a whoop rushed out on both sides from behind the cart--Lukashka in front of them. Olenin heard only a few shots, then shouting and moans. He thought he saw smoke and blood, and abandoning his horse and quite beside himself he ran towards the Cossacks. Horror seemed to blind him. He could not make out anything, but understood that all was over. Lukashka, pale as death, was holding a wounded Chechen by the arms and shouting, 'Don't kill him. I'll take him alive!' The Chechen was the red-haired man who had fetched his brother's body away after Lukashka had killed him. Lukashka was twisting his arms. Suddenly the Chechen wrenched himself free and fired his pistol. Lukashka fell, and blood began to flow from his stomach. He jumped up, but fell again, swearing in Russian and in Tartar. More and more blood appeared on his clothes and under him. Some Cossacks approached him and began loosening his girdle. One of them, Nazarka, before beginning to help, fumbled for some time, unable to put his sword in its sheath: it would not go the right way. The blade of the sword was blood-stained.

The Chechens with their red hair and clipped moustaches lay dead and hacked about. Only the one we know of, who had fired at Lukashka, though wounded in many places was still alive. Like a wounded hawk all covered with blood (blood was flowing from a wound under his right eye), pale and gloomy, he looked about him with wide--open excited eyes and clenched teeth as he crouched, dagger in hand, still prepared to defend himself. The cornet went up to him as if intending to pass by, and with a quick movement shot him in the ear. The Chechen started up, but it was too late, and he fell.

The Cossacks, quite out of breath, dragged the bodies aside and took the weapons from them. Each of the red-haired Chechens had been a man, and each one had his own individual expression. Lukashka was carried to the cart. He continued to swear in Russian and in Tartar.

'No fear, I'll strangle him with my hands. ANNA SENI!' he cried, struggling. But he soon became quiet from weakness.

Olenin rode home. In the evening he was told that Lukashka was at death's door, but that a Tartar from beyond the river had undertaken to cure him with herbs.

The bodies were brought to the village office. The women and the little boys hastened to look at them.

It was growing dark when Olenin returned, and he could not collect himself after what he had seen. But towards night memories of the evening before came rushing to his mind. He looked out of the window, Maryanka was passing to and fro from the house to the cowshed, putting things straight. Her mother had gone to the vineyard and her father to the office. Olenin could not wait till she had quite finished her work, but went out to meet her. She was in the hut standing with her back towards him. Olenin thought she felt shy.

'Maryanka,' said he, 'I say, Maryanka! May I come in?'

She suddenly turned. There was a scarcely perceptible trace of tears in her eyes and her face was beautiful in its sadness. She looked at him in silent dignity.

Olenin again said:

'Maryanka, I have come--'

'Leave me alone!' she said. Her face did not change but the tears ran down her cheeks.

'What are you crying for? What is it?'

'What?' she repeated in a rough voice. 'Cossacks have been killed, that's what for.'

'Lukashka?' said Olenin.

'Go away! What do you want?'

'Maryanka!' said Olenin, approaching her.

'You will never get anything from me!'

'Maryanka, don't speak like that,' Olenin entreated.

'Get away. I'm sick of you!' shouted the girl, stamping her foot, and moved threateningly towards him. And her face expressed such abhorrence, such contempt, and such anger that Olenin suddenly understood that there was no hope for him, and that his first impression of this woman's inaccessibility had been perfectly correct.

Olenin said nothing more, but ran out of the hut.